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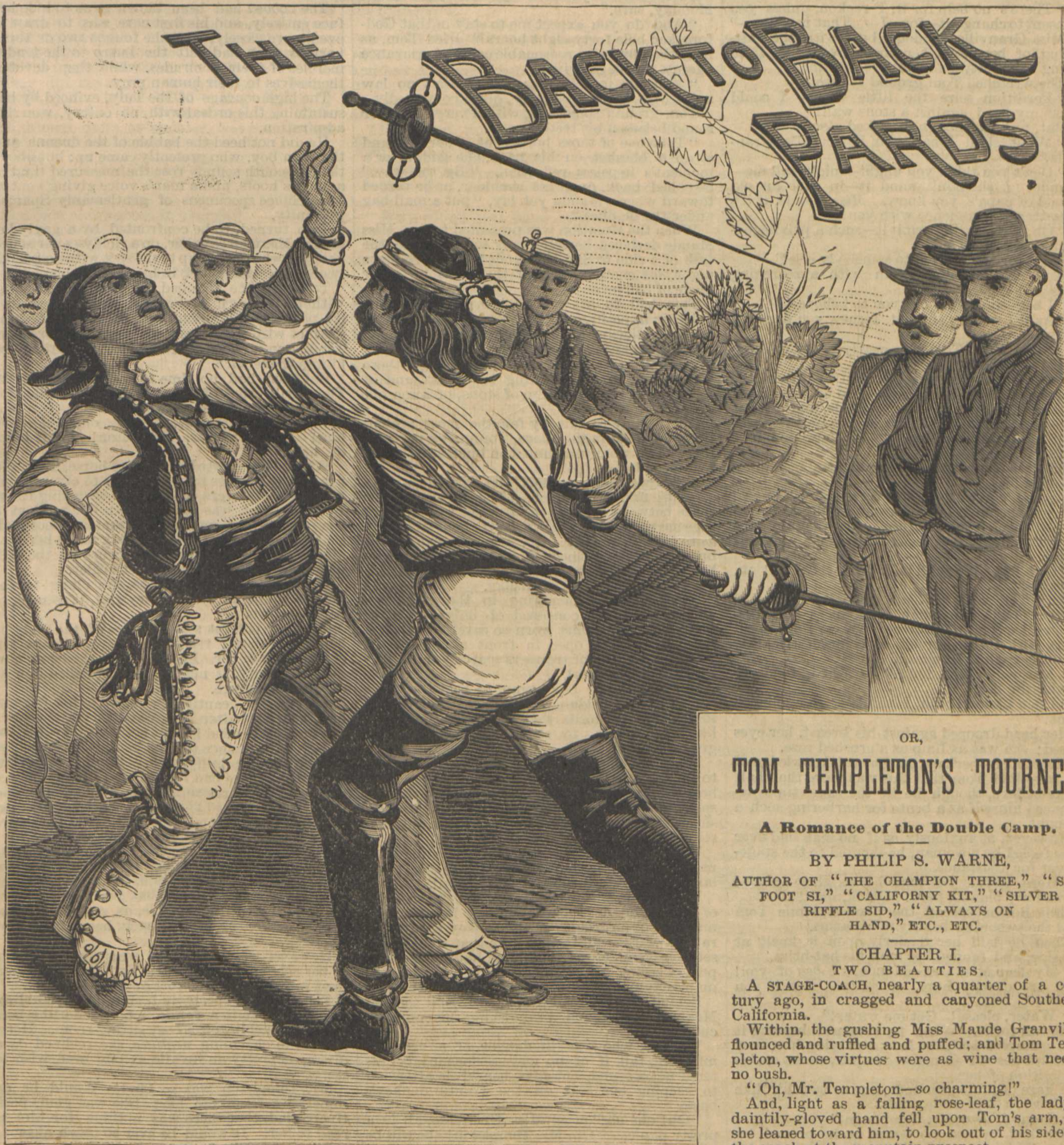
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OR,

TOM TEMPLETON'S TOURNEY.

A Romance of the Double Camp.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF "THE CHAMPION THREE," "SIX-
FOOT SI," "CALIFORNIA KIT," "SILVER
RIFLE SID," "ALWAYS ON
HAND," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. TWO BEAUTIES.

A STAGE-COACH, nearly a quarter of a cen-
tury ago, in cragged and canyoned Southern
California.

Within, the gushing Miss Maude Granville,
flounced and ruffled and puffed; and Tom Tem-
pleton, whose virtues were as wine that needs
no bush.

"Oh, Mr. Templeton—so charming!"

And, light as a falling rose-leaf, the lady's
daintily-gloved hand fell upon Tom's arm, as
she leaned toward him, to look out of his side of
the coach at the mountain prospect.

"M, ah! very—very charming, Miss Gran-
ville!"

THEN, BEFORE HE COULD RECOVER, TOM SPRUNG IN UPON HIM, CLUTCHING HIS
THROAT WITH HIS POWERFUL LEFT HAND.

And in the nervousness with which the light touch seemed to inspire him, Tom nearly poked his head out of the window, though most men would have thought his companion far better worth study than the landscape.

Who would have dreamed that such a hulking fellow—six feet in his stockings, if an inch!—would be afraid of a midge of five at most, making no allowance for the high French heels on which she balanced with such consummate skill?

But then, many a man who would charge a park of howitzers without flinching, is fain to capitulate at discretion when a battery of heavenly blue eyes, behind a *cheval-de-frise* of golden eyelashes, is brought to bear on him.

The lady withdrew her hand with a pout of her red lip, and a movement of the shoulders that made her ribbon-bedecked toilet suggest the ruffling of a bird's plumage.

"Don't you find it tiresome, Mr. Templeton, to be so—so *very* formal?"

"Eh? I—I beg your pardon!"

And with even more trepidation than when he had thrust his head out of the window, Tom drew it in again, turning toward the petulant beauty a face red with confusion, and drawn with helpless misery.

"Granville!" with a stamp of pretty impatience. "I just *hate* the name! It's as ugly—"

"Oh, if you will allow me to protest—"

"But I won't! It's *ugly*, I say! Now *yours*—Ah!"

With a little sigh of admiration, she lifted her eyes to his face, and dropped them again.

Tom made a headlong plunge, guided by only a blind, instinctive gallantry.

"There's no help for it, I reckon, unless you consent to change it—for—I— That is to say—"

Miss Granville, suddenly busy with the fastening of her glove, here bent over it as if to bring her pretty teeth into requisition.

The wretched Tom ground his teeth.

"Perdition seize the little vixen! I could mash my head against a stone wall!"

But, humble enough, he asked aloud:

"What shall I call you, if not Miss Granville?"

"Don't you think you might—might call me—Maude? I shouldn't mind it—in such an old friend of papa's, you know. Miss Maude, if it's a matter of conscience with you!"

"Oh, if you will permit it—such a privilege—such an honor as I—"

"But for the treason to somebody else?"

And she transfixed him with a searching glance.

"I beg—indeed, I beg you to believe—"

"As if I were so simple! I know you naughty fellows!"

By this time Tom was nearly ready to jump out of the coach.

"Confound that Sim Rankin!"—this in the secret chambers of his soul—"to be step-father to such a giddy piece of dry-goods, and to put her on *my* hands! I'll land her in 'Frisco as soon as horse-flesh can do it—hang me if I don't!"

But "the best-laid plans o' mice an' men gang aft a'glee!"

Rattle! clatter! crash!—then, bump! bump! bump!—the plunging horses, dragging the overturned coach some distance before they brought up with a bang, fast locked between a rock and a tree.

"Oh! oh! We shall be killed! Save me! oh, save me!"

And Tom with no little difficulty extricated himself from a medley of flounces and furbelows, leaving their owner in a very crumpled state, with a thin streak of crimson trickling across her white forehead.

"Are you much hurt?" he asked, tenderly supporting her.

"I don't know! Oh, I think—I am going to faint!"

Her head drooped against his breast, her eyes closed; she was as limp as a crushed rose.

Something—perhaps his general knowledge of the sex—told Tom that this was more than half make-believe, though he at the same time denounced himself as a brute for harboring such a thought.

However, as anxiously as if no man had ever been fooled by a woman, he shouted to the stage-driver for assistance.

"Here, Billy! Let those horses go to—ahem! Spread my blanket here! Quick, man!"

Billy Boston spread the blanket, while Tom held the swooning beauty in his arms.

Then he laid her tenderly upon it, knelt at her side, and fanned her with his hat-brim.

"My dear Miss Gra—Maude! I beg of you! You are cruelly hurt, of course. But if you *could*—"

"Water, please! Get me water!"

He ran for it. When he returned, bearing it in a crumpled leaf, the lady was lying in a very graceful posture—a marked improvement on his disposition of her.

A gaze of mute gratitude, one or two birdlike swallows, a wan smile, and—

"So kind, dear Mr. Templeton!"

She had broken no bones, as he proved by lifting first one arm and then the other, and by giving a skillful twist in turn to a pair of feet

that would have made Cinderella tear her hair with envy. Then:

"How gentle you are—and you know so well how to manage! But you have been thinking only of me. You must be hurt!"

Tom protested his entire soundness, advising that she lie still until he saw what could be done with the coach.

Billy Boston stood staring at the wreck, with his feet wide apart, and his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"Well?" asked Tom, coming up.

The end of the front axle was broken off.

"What can be done?" asked Tom, frowningly forecasting existence with the irrepressible Miss Granville as a fixture on his hands.

"Ef it war the hind ex," said Billy Boston, reflectively, "we might prop her up with a saplin'. But the *front* ex!"

And he added an oburgation which implied that this was a hopeless case.

"What is the next town on this route?"

"San Hernandez."

"How far from here?"

"The better part o' three miles."

"This is the only coach line running north from there, I suppose?"

"Why, boss, you don't 'low as coach lines grow on the bushes out hyar?"

"Nothing east or west of here, at a reasonable distance?"

"In Missouri, I reckon. I never was in Chiny."

"How long will it take to mend that thing?"

"Waal," said Billy, giving a hitch to his trowsers, "to-day is Saturday; to-morrer's Sunday; the next day is Monday. We'll git 'er out Monday, sure."

"And do you expect me to stay in that God-forsaken hole forty-eight hours?" cried Tom, as if he thereby had a reasonable cause of grievance against the stage-driver.

"You kin foot it, boss. Thar ain't no law ag'in' *that*," answered Billy, quite composedly.

Tom ground something with a very improper sound between his teeth.

"Take one of those horses out of harness, and strap a blanket on his back," he said, after a moment's hopeless reflection. "By the way," he called back, over his shoulder, as he turned toward where Maude yet lay, "put a mail-bag under the blanket."

When the situation was presented to her, Miss Maude declared herself ready to undertake the task of a ride to San Hernandez, the more since night was coming on, and there was no other mode of conveyance.

Tom had to lift her to her place, and then hold her in position all the way, the slightest relaxation eliciting a tremulous cry of alarm.

San Hernandez proved to be an old Mexican town, built principally of adobes, though there was a stone Mission fronting the Plaza, and in its environs the *casa*, also of stone, of some old grandee.

On the way to this, by far the most pretentious domicile in the place, Tom met a party of three—two women mounted on burros, followed by a peon lad on foot.

A glance showed that the women were a senorita and her duenna. The former, as the space between her and the strangers of another race narrowed, drew her *robosa* about so closely as to hide all of her face, save one eye and a brow of exquisite beauty. The latter, leaving her wrinkled face exposed, glowered at the "gringos" in suspicious dislike.

She muttered something to the peon lad, whose wardrobe consisted of only a hat of plaited rushes, a shirt worn so carelessly that it was left to gape open in front almost to the waist, and a pair of trowsers scarcely more useful than ornamental.

In response, the boy began to beat the burro ridden by the beldam, adding shrill shouts and some Mexican words that sounded suspiciously like execrations, to stimulate the beast to greater expedition.

When he came to apply the same treatment to the little drudge whose privilege it was to bear the senorita, the brute, whether from higher spirit, or because he was made vain by his office, shied off to the roadside, so as to brush through some bushes.

The next instant, kicking and squealing with pain and rage, he came tearing down the road, lashing his body furiously with his tail.

The woman threw up her arms, uttering cries of alarm in a cracked voice. Besides, she mingled oburgations of the donkey with adjurations of the saints, in a way that would have set Tom Templeton to laughing, but for the prospect of seeing an exquisite bit of feminine humanity tumbled all in a heap in the dusty road.

Behind, the peon lad ran, shouting all sorts of Mexican oaths and brandishing his unlucky cudgel.

The girl, who was in danger of a very humiliating fall, if of no more serious injury, uttered not a sound, but gave her whole attention to keeping her seat on the frantic donkey's back.

"Oh! oh! oh!" cried Miss Granville, all in a pretty panic. "Oh, Mr. Templeton! she will be killed—poor thing! Oh, don't leave me! I shall fall! I can't manage this brute! Oh! oh!"

Tom Templeton had seized the situation at a glance. The burro had brushed through a hornets' nest, bringing the little pests out upon him in a cloud.

Tortured as he was, it would be impossible to stop even so small a beast, without some danger to the lady on his back. Besides, he had company which it would be well not to detain.

Forcing the animal ridden by his charge to the side of the road, to give the other a free course, Tom turned so as to face in the same direction, and then waited for him to pass.

As the runaway came opposite to him, the rescuer set out at a run which carried him over the ground at a fully equal pace.

A moment, and he was beside the frightened, yet heroic, girl.

Another, and he had his arm about her!

A third, and she was out of the saddle!

The poets tell of beauties so light of tread that they do not bend the daisies in passing; but in sober fact loveliness weighs sixteen ounces to the pound avoirdupois, every time!

The sudden assumption of a hundred and fifteen or twenty pounds when running at full speed, is a tax for any man.

Tom Templeton bore up bravely; but the best he could do, after staggering several paces wildly, was to fetch up on his knees, in such a way that he was rather mixed up in the lady's draperies, yet with the happiness of having saved her from the slightest injury.

He felt the clasp of her arm about his neck, and was intoxicated by the odor of some subtle and exquisite perfume which her garments exhaled.

The *robosa* had been blown so as to hide her face entirely, and his first care was to draw it even more closely, while he fought two or three hornets that had left the burro to the tender mercies of their comrades, while they devoted themselves to their human prey.

The high courage of the lady, evinced by her sustaining this ordeal with no outcry, won his admiration.

He did not heed the babble of the duenna and the peon boy, who presently came up; but above these uncouth sounds rose the measured thud of a horse's hoofs, and a man's voice giving vent to some choice specimens of gentlemanly Spanish profanity.

Tom turned, to be confronted by a gayly-bedecked Mexican cavalier, on a richly-caparisoned charger, who dashed up to the spot with no friendly or appreciative look in his piercing black eyes.

To be sure he thanked the rescuer in words, with an air as if he had the right to consider it a personal obligation; but his countenance was instinct with "Greaser" jealousy. He bore Tom Templeton no good will for having anticipated him in the service.

But Tom had no time to analyze his moods. The shrill voice of Miss Maude Granville was calling to him for succor.

"Oh, Mr. Templeton! Oh, oh, oh! Stop him! Oh, dear Mr. Templeton! Help! help! oh, help!"

What had started the stage horse, Tom did not know, because he was not by to observe certain sly maneuvers of the now shrieking rider. But the beast was going down the road at a heavy trot, that gave Miss Maude a thorough shaking-up, though the mail-bag made her seat almost as broad and quite as secure as the old-fashioned pad-saddle of a circus rider.

Wildly, to all appearance, she clung to the horse's mane, in momentary risk, it seemed, of being thrown.

Tom had not yet seen the face of the lady he had rescued, nor received a word of acknowledgment from her. But of course, she being now in safety, duty, if not inclination, called him at once to his charge.

Leaving the beautiful Spaniard to her friends, he ran swiftly after Miss Maude.

You may depend he did not overtake her, so as to have a chance to look back, till he was far beyond the possibility of any further interview with the lady he had rescued.

When he had restrained the stage horse, and soothed his excited rider, he then glanced back, in spite of Miss Maude's effort to hold his entire attention by her chatter.

The Spanish lady, mounted on the horse of the cavalier, was being hurried toward the *casa*. The distance of separation, thus increased at both ends, was so great that her features were not clearly distinguishable, as, seated sideways in the saddle, she looked back, her *robosa* now removed.

However, she waved the scarf in expression of her sense of indebtedness, in spite of the evident protests of her escort and her duenna.

Tom was unexpectedly fortunate in establishing his charge in a *fonda*, where she had a bed-chamber opening off a cozy sitting-room. Here, dressed in charming *negligee*, she reclined on a divan, as pretty an invalid as one need wish to see.

Mr. Templeton was so kind! Would he do something to amuse her? She was glad, positively glad, that there was nothing for him to read to her. It would be ever so much nicer to talk! Did he sing? Oh, of course he must, etc., etc., etc.

Tom execrated that broken wheel with more bitterness, if not more volubility, than did even Billy Boston, and that's saying a great deal! But through it all, he could not forget that, but for that accident, he would have lost the opportunity to hold within his arms the divinest of her sex.

His imagination had already carried him to such lengths as this; and while he replied to Miss Maude's chatter, his thoughts kept straying away to the odor of her Spanish rival's garments, and the touch of her hair on his forehead.

When at last he had said good-night, and was free, he went out with a sense of vast relief, and the very first man he ran against was jolly Charley Osborne. Hurrah!

CHAPTER II.

THE FAIR DEVOTEE.

"OSBORNE!"

"Hallo! Why, Tom, old man, how you was?"

"Better! Put 'er there, Spuds!"

"For three years, or the war! Come along—come along!"

Never was a heartier hand-clasp between old friends.

Charley Osborne was a fair rival for Tom Templeton in height, in breadth of shoulders, in erectness of bearing. Both, too, wore long hair and mustaches. But here the resemblance ceased, for their features were quite different, and while Charley's hair was jet-black, Tom's was blonde.

They might be mistaken for each other in the dark, when only the general outlines of figure were distinguishable; but in the daylight no one thought of the resemblance save as constituting them "a mighty fine team."

They differed most in temperament: Charley—frank, jolly, whole-souled—being found by most men more of a boon companion; while Tom, though quite as popular, was not so often slapped unceremoniously on the back.

"But, what are you doing here, Tom? I thought you were in Lower Cal., making your pile."

"Pile, nothing! I'm on my way to 'Frisco, with a bale of drygoods in charge."

"With a what?"

"One of the fair sex. By the way, Charley, just your style."

And Tom looked so wistfully at his friend that he set him to laughing.

"Bless your sweet soul!" he cried. "Does a woman make you qualmish? She must be mighty old!"

"No she ain't! 'Pon my soul she ain't! Not a day over twenty, I give you the word of a gentleman!"

"What! twenty, and— She's got a birthmark—a bare-lip!"

"She? She's an angel, I swear to you!"

"You old sinner! You don't mean to tell me—"

"Hold on, Charley! You know Sim Rankin?"

"Don't I? He did me the honor to clean me out of my last stiver, not three months ago!"

"It's his daughter. He put—"

"Why, he isn't old enough to have a daughter of twenty."

"He's married something a trifle ancient, and this was an incumbrance. I fancy her mother has sent her to 'Frisco, to keep her from driving Sim wild."

"What!"

"Lord bless me! what have I been saying? But I'm all unstrung, Charley. If you love me, you will help me out of a scrape."

"By taking the young lady off your hands?"

"Don't go so fast! Listen! I am to see Miss Granville—"

"Granville! Delightful name!"

"Glad you like it, old man. You'll find the lady herself even better. And then, she has no foolish partiality for the name, and might be persuaded to change it."

"Oh, is that the sniff? What is her other handle?"

"Maude."

"No; I dote on it. Drive ahead!"

"Well, I'm to see her safely in the hands of friends in 'Frisco. Three or four miles out the coach broke down. How I did curse that wheel! But how little we know when the gods are kind to us!"

"Eh! what has happened?"

"Within sight of the spot we stand on, I encountered an angel!"

"Oh, come off!"

"An angel, I tell you. She was mounted on a burro which I shall always hold in grateful remembrance for one moment of unalloyed bliss, even if final despair come of the adventure!"

"Oh, oh, oh!" laughed Osborne. "Pull up, pard! Cheese the burro! I hope, with all my heart, that he'll go to burro heaven when he dies, where there are plenty of old rubber shoes to eat, and no cudgels or cudgelers. But tell us about the angel."

Tom gave a most glowing account of his adventure.

"Who is she? How can she be got at? Those

are the questions of the hour. Why, hang it, man, I haven't had the blessed privilege of a fair sight of her lovely face yet!"

"Take a fool's advice, pard, and don't stop to see it!"

"What? Go away without seeing her?"

"Do you know who the fellow is that you dispose of as a Greaser?"

"Hang him and his whole tribe and generation! What difference does it make who he is?"

"A heap, you bet! He is Senor Alverado Saumarez; Senor Alverado Saumarez is Don Jose Monteiro da Rocha's right-hand man, and the Don runs this place."

"Let him run it! What's that to do with the lady and me?"

"A trifle! Your angel is no less than Don Jose's daughter, the Senorita Francisca Monteiro da Rocha. I congratulate you, and condole with you, in the same breath."

"And why, pray?"

"I congratulate you for to-day's bliss, and condole with you for to-morrow's remembrance. A man who has been in heaven and had to come out, is worse off, it seems to me, than one who has never been so blessed."

"And do you think that your Dons are going to head me off?"

"They'll head you off, or bury you, Tom! Saumarez is a dead shot, and he don't want anything better than a dog of an Americano to keep his hand in on," laughed Osborne.

"He'll have the chance!" blustered Tom, flushing with defiance, "or the chance to back down! Charley, you keep Miss Granville quiet, so that I can skirmish around with a free foot for to-morrow."

"With all my heart, as far as Miss Maude is concerned. Only I warn you again that Alverado is the ugliest customer you ever tackled, and he's got a lot of bad men at his back. They may take the notion to drop you out between two days. If they do, nothing can ever be done about it here. He owns the place."

"I'll stand my chances!" answered Tom, doggedly.

Then, as it was too late to present his friend that night, he turned the conversation.

"But what are you doing in this Greaser hole?"

"Why, don't you know that the boys have struck it over on the hill?"

"What hill? No, I've never heard anything about the place."

"Well, here's just where you want to put up, then. And, whether you do or not, if you're proposing to have a tilt with Saumarez, you'd better go over and see the boys, and get a few of them at your back. You'll need them!"

Then Osborne led the way out of the Spanish town, to the other side of a narrow stream, where, till now hidden from view by a belt of timber, a miscellaneous group of tents and shanties marked the site of a mining camp.

"Behold," he cried, with a comprehensive wave of his hand, "the coming gold center of the State—Golden Bow."

Whatever its future, there was nothing just then to distinguish Golden Bow from any other of the thousands of camps that were springing up all over the mountain country.

The greatest space under shelter was a large square tent, brilliantly illuminated, and densely crowded, to judge from the shifting silhouettes thrown on its walls.

A violin, a clarinet, a banjo, and a violoncello, made a conglomerate of sounds that passed for music, and the shadows of flying figures showed that it kept time for a lot of very lively dancers.

The door of this establishment stood wide open, and before it flared the flames of two immense gasoline lamps.

It goes without saying that there were drinking and gambling, as well as dancing, going on in this tent. Half a dozen different games gave the adventurer a choice as to how he would lose his money.

Here Tom Templeton was gratified to find not a few old friends. He was also presented by Charley Osborne to others, many of whom already knew him by reputation, though he had never heard of them.

It was not new to Tom to find himself the center of an admiring crowd. Wherever he went, he was used to inspiring friends and strangers with a common sentiment of homage.

In a measure his commanding figure did it. Then his clear eye, and a certain unaffected air of taking it for granted that others would look to him for guidance, made him a natural leader of men.

He found that a very absorbing topic of conversation was engaging the attention of the mining community. Over their glasses, during intervals in the dance, even while the interest of gambling was momentarily relaxed by the necessity of shuffling the cards, it broke out, wherever two or more men were grouped together.

"Things have about come to a head here," explained Osborne. "This camp forms virtually one community with San Hernandez, and the boys have made up their minds that, whether the Greasers will or no, the two places shall be put under one government. We've had two or

three skirmishes over the matter already, and the Greasers have about come to the conclusion that the thing is inevitable. Their only hope is, to get in a man who will be as favorable to them as possible.

"On our side, we are not dead sure of the issue, if it were to come to a square knock-down-and-drag-out."

"You see, there's a hard crowd in this camp that we're afraid to count on. One thing we make no mistake on: they'd sell us out mighty cheap, if they could make anything."

"Who are the candidates?" asked Tom, rather to keep the conversation flowing, than from any particular interest in the matter.

The truth is, he was casting about in his mind for some way of securing an interview with the fair Francisca.

"Cap Frobisher, for one!" answered Osborne, pointing out a man with a heavy beard, who was paying very close attention to the game he was playing, perhaps withheld from the discussion going on about him by the proper modesty of an aspirant to office.

"He looks like a good one," remarked Tom, eying the man critically.

"Yes," answered Osborne, rather vaguely.

The tone struck Templeton's ear, and he turned with a quick inquiring smile.

"Are you up, Charley?"

"Well, I believe my name has been mentioned by some of the boys."

And then, as if it became a man in such a position to disparage himself:

"The fact is, we're rather crowded for a candidate. The Greasers are ready to compromise on Saumarez—"

"To compromise! That would look to me more like consenting to annex your territory."

"Oh! Saumarez isn't a clear Greaser. He's a half-breed. His mother was white."

For to the noble American miner there is no particular choice between a dog, an Indian and a "Greaser."

"He has always fraternized almost, if not quite, as much with Americans as with his own stock," continued Osborne. "He has a crowd of the worst kind to back him. We don't know just how many. They won't show their hands till the tug-of-war comes. They talk mighty pretty just now. Between you and me," and Osborne lowered his voice cautiously, "if Saumarez don't own a secret gang here, and keep them by an occasional dip into road-agenting, I and a few others are mightily out."

"Why don't you come down on him?" cried Tom indignantly.

"We can't catch him napping."

"Ah! you ought to have somebody who would set about it with a will."

And Tom's lips closed hard, and his eyes flashed with the glint of war.

"That's just what we do want," admitted Osborne, with a dubious knitting of the brows.

"Well, how do you propose to settle it?"

"We're going to have an election in a few days. We're trying to canvass the thing, and see just where we stand. If we can rush somebody in, we'll be glad to leave Mr. Saumarez on the outside; but if we can't, we'd better compromise the thing with him."

"By giving him the whole hog!" exclaimed Tom, almost contemptuously. "You can't compromise with that kind of an animal. I had only one squint at him, but that was enough."

"Then we may have to resort to Greaser tactics, and drop him out between two days," suggested Osborne, with an ugly hardening of his face.

But this was plainly talk with him. His face cleared, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Any way," he corrected, "one of us will have to meet him for the good of the rest."

"Does any one hanker after it?"

"No, and that's a fact!"

"I reckon I'll find your alcalde on my back!" laughed Tom. "Good luck to him—or, rather, bad luck to him! I pity you!"

And with no thought of the possibility of his having any share in the coming struggle, Tom went to bed, to dream of an angel, only one of whose eyes was yielded to his eager gaze.

He was up bright and early on the following morning, and his first thought was, that the angel who had haunted his pillow throughout the night was a good church devotee, and so would probably be out to early mass.

Never in his life did he make a more careful toilet, with less satisfaction with the result.

He sallied forth even before the most rigorous devotee was astir, and while Miss Granville was yet flirting with Morpheus, if anybody.

He haunted the entrance to the Mission till it occurred to him that, if the duenna espied him, it might frighten his angel away.

What was his delight when he saw an old chariot of mediaeval state coming from the casa, occupied by three female figures?

He looked for the appearance of Senor Saumarez, or some other male mar-plot, but was pleasantly disappointed in this particular.

Then he dodged into the Mission, and almost hid behind one of the confessionals, near the door.

By this time quite a number of dusky worshippers had made their appearance.

Tom was aware of the movements of priests and acolytes through a service which he did not follow; of the twinkling of candles; of a weird chanting from some quarter, he knew not where. His whole soul the while was bent upon the door at which she would presently enter.

She came! Ah, what divine grace! Her eyes never lifted from the floor! She was a saint! What dolts were they who let her pass without noticing the halo that her beauty and purity diffused around!

She knelt, the dragon on one side of her, one nearer her own age on the other.

It was a long time before Tom could take his eyes off his divinity to look at this little maid. Yet she was well worth looking at. Her black eyes were never made to spend all their time in studying the floor; and the red lips that sighed "*Ave Maria!*" were quite as apt at another tale!

Was it the flutter of a handkerchief that caught Tom Templeton's eye? Did the coquette get the better of the devotee? Was it possible that she had lifted her eyes in his direction, for just one quivering glance? Ah, if the mistress would vouchsafe so much!

But, what was that? Tom's eyes almost popped out of his head! A note hidden in the little maid's handkerchief?

"I'm a fool!" he said to himself. "She never did it!"

But, his heart beat so wildly that it almost suffocated him.

The sport of all sorts of mad hopes, he moved toward the door, and there hid behind a pillar, just where the font of holy water was, holding his hat so as almost entirely to conceal his face.

No danger but she would find him, if she was looking for him with her heart in her eyes.

The service ended. The worshipers began to pass out, not in a body, but each as he or she listed. Tom had eyes but for a certain party of three.

They came! She was first! She dipped a rosy finger into the font, and made those quick, deft passes that form the cross—and never glanced up at him!

Tom was in despair.

"She has never given me a thought! Why should she? She is an angel! Ah, such loveliness! such holiness! No thought of earth could disturb the saintly calm of her virgin bosom at such a time!"

Tom felt as if he were guilty of a profanation, his soul rioting with earthly love, while hers was wrapped in pious contemplation.

But, what was this? A glare of hatred from the duenna, and a bird-like glance from the pretty maid! Was it possible? Something had been said to her of the adventure of yesterday, or, more probably, she had seen it from the roof of the *casa*. At any rate, she was a woman, with a woman's interest in romantic passion. Tom looked at her with his whole soul pouring out a piteous appeal through his speaking eyes.

Then he caught his breath! Even while she trod on the heels of the duenna, something white fluttered to the floor from the folds of her voluminous skirts. A handkerchief, beyond the shadow of a doubt!

How Tom fastened upon it! Heavens! he felt within its soft folds what could be nothing else but a note! A note from the maid! What now of his saint? But a woman—a loving woman—is better than an icy saint, any day! At any rate, he would be an unworthy lover who did not think so.

Then he heard the little maid crying, with pretty affectation:

"Ah, dear mother Benita! wait, one little minute! My handkerchief! I have lost it!"

"Beast! Traitor! Little liar!" snarled the griffin. "Ah, I will myself find your handkerchief for you! I will blister your feet, to keep you from gadding, if you have been tricking me, even in the holy church!"

Good heavens! she was returning! What should he do? In a twinkling he had the note out of the handkerchief and into his vest-pocket. But, how should he dispose of the handkerchief?

He was on the point of dropping it on the floor, when he saw that it was already discovered in his hand.

He made a pretense of looking about for the owner, and when Benita presented herself with a glare and a growl, he handed it to her with a sickly smile.

She snatched it from him without taking her eyes from his. Without thanks, unless a savage hissing of some inarticulate word could be so construed, she turned away, and sought her charges in the chariot.

Tom was in an agony of suspense. Had he done well? He studied the face of the little maid, as she extended her hand for the little lace trifle. It was quite unconcerned.

Still Francisca did not look at him.

But the note! His heart was beating wildly against it! He could not wait to get back to his *fonda*, but placing the nearest adobe house between himself and the chariot, he pulled out the note, and devoured it with burning eyes.

It did not seem to be satisfactory. His face flushed. Then he swore, as he crumpled the bit of paper in his hand. He ended by laughing.

"Of all the confounded fools that ever lived, I am the worst!"

Not a little crestfallen, he turned his back in the direction of the *casa*, so that he could not look after the retreating chariot, and walked away.

For a long time he only ground his teeth with the bitter humiliation of a snubbed lover. But then came a thought born of anger. He read the note again.

"GOMEZ, MY FRIEND:—

"Forget not the fandango this night!

"CHIQUITA."

That was all—absolutely all!

"I have intercepted a note from that little minx to her lover!" exclaimed Tom, with intense disgust.

And he had dared to think it a communication from his angel! If it had been but a word of thanks! But this thing!

Deluded by it, he had lost his one chance, which fate had thrust beneath his very nose. What a dolt, not to have seized at once upon the opportunity to slip a bribe into the scrawny paw of that old beldam! He had given her an empty handkerchief, with his best bow!

But he bethought him of one recourse yet remaining. The maid was to attend some fandango!

Of course the dragon would not follow at her heels. He would find this fandango, and get speech with the little maid. All was not yet lost.

Suppose his angel was really thinking of him, but dared not let it be seen? Was not her very avoidance of his glance significant in itself? And he had been over bold! Perhaps his obtrusiveness had caused her inconvenience! By this time he was almost persuaded of his wildest hopes.

Sure enough, he found upon making inquiry that there was to be a fandango that night—a masked affair; just the thing that would permit a secret interview if the lady was so disposed!

Having arranged everything to his liking, he went to call upon Miss Granville, and with a smile as sweet as honey, and a purr as soft as a kitten's, she presented him with a piece of news that stabbed him to the heart!

CHAPTER III.

PLOTTERS OVERHEARD.

Now little Miss Granville was wise in her day and generation. She was not blind to the change that had come over Tom Templeton since his adventure with the unknown senorita.

Before, he had been nervously ill at ease, so that it amused her hugely to tease him by the forwardness of a coquette. Now, he was absent-minded.

"And I am to be cut out by a copper-colored Greaser belle!" cried Maude, with flashing eyes.

Having held Tom at her side till it was too late for him to seek the unknown, she dismissed him, and at once called to her attendant.

"Guillemma, I want you to find the stage-driver, and bring him here to me."

The Mexican woman was old and wrinkled. She had a crafty, creeping way with her. Her little black eyes were full of wicked suspicion, as she answered, softly:

"In the morning, senorita."

"Immediately!" commanded Maude. "I want him as soon as he can be found."

"Here?" murmured Guillemma.

"Here!" replied Maude, looking her unflinchingly in the eye.

"It is very late," objected the woman, yet with a meekness that deprecated offense.

"Am not I to be the judge of when I will receive guests?"

"A thousand pardons, senorita! It is that I am old, and the night dark. Where shall I find the Senor Boston?"

"Hand me my purse, I think I can sharpen your perceptions."

The avaricious twinkle in the woman's eyes showed the wisdom of Maude's recourse.

A gold coin had a wonderfully quickening effect.

"There is my nephew," suggested Guillemma, suddenly recollecting the existence of such an individual. "He will be glad to serve the senorita in all ways."

"Tell him that my principal characteristic is impatience," said Maude, dryly. "I don't like to be kept waiting."

"Ah! who was more expeditious than Pablo!"

Indeed, it was not long before Billy Boston presented himself, hat in hand.

"Yer sarvant, ma'am!" he said, bowing with an old-fashioned scrape of the foot.

"When is your stage to be ready to go on?" asked Maude, sweetly.

She could never speak to a man, of whatever station, without some display of her arts.

Now Billy Boston was not loth to stay at San Hernandez when he had a good excuse to offer his employers. Truth to tell, he had run across a certain black-eyed houri who was wheedling his money out of him, to their mutual satisfaction. So he answered:

"Waal, some time Tuesday, I reckon."

"I understood you to tell Mr. Templeton Monday."

"Thar ain't no lie in that, ma'am. But, ye see, these hyar Greasers is blamed slow. Thar ain't no countin' on 'em nohow."

"I have made up my mind to leave San Hernandez to-morrow."

"Eh? Ef your fitten fur hoss-back—"

"In the coach."

"In my hearse?"

"Exactly."

"It can't be did, ma'am!"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Boston. I know you want to oblige me."

Such a smile! Billy hitched at his trousers, shifted his quid, coughed, and dropped his eyes to the floor to escape the witchery of her glance.

"I hope you will believe, ma'am, as I'm yours to command fur all I'm worth. But, these hyar Greasers, blast 'em!—beggin' your pardon ma'am!"

"Don't wait for an axle to be made. Find an old one somewhere that will do for the rest of our journey."

"But front axles, ma'am, don't grow on bushes in these diggin's!"

"Certainly not!"

And with the most alluring of smiles, Maude extended a sum of money that made Billy's eyes snap.

"I want to go so much!" was her only argument.

And what other does beauty need?

But, Billy had his code of what was becoming in a gentleman of his quality. He flushed and shifted his weight from one foot to the other with marked embarrassment, as he stammered:

"I hope you don't 'low, ma'am—"

"I know these Greasers!" declared Maude. "Money will make them do anything. Please take it; and if they are still in doubt as to where they last saw an axle that will answer our purpose, I have more of the same reminder for them."

Billy manifested more and more uneasiness. But there arose in his consciousness the painful reflection that the beautiful bayadere had already bled him almost to his last rupee.

"Ef I wasn't about strapped, I hope, ma'am, you don't believe I'd take yer money fur to git you on yer way," he began, apologetically.

"Oh, the matter is between me and the company," said Maude, more sweetly than ever. "A soulless corporation, you know, has no sentiment of this kind. Only, don't disappoint me."

"I'll owe you one," declared Billy, gratefully, as he accepted the money. "This hyar will make me solid, with the ole man,"—meaning the superintendent of the stage company. "Ef ye want to keep him sweet, don't lose no time!"

So this was the news with which Maude stabbed our tremulous lover.

"Good news! good news, dear Mr. Templeton! You are not to be bored as long as you feared, by having a stay in this poky little place."

"Eh? I beg your pardon!" cried Tom, feeling as if his breath were suddenly taken away.

"We are to start again at ten o'clock, this very morning!"

"Impossible!"

But the dismay in Tom's face showed that he feared that the gods had really played him this scurvy trick.

"On the contrary, it is not only possible, but probable, nay, certain!"

"But a broken axle—"

"Can be mended with a new one, or rather an old one! Our accommodating stage-driver seems to have bestirred himself to oblige you. He was here this morning, all smiles, to claim your gratitude."

Tom felt a longing to get his grip on Billy Boston's gullet.

"But you," he stammered, catching at the first straw that drifted his way. "I hope you don't think me so selfish—"

"Me! Oh, I'm as anxious to get away as you are. Don't worry about me."

"But after such a shock, and your injuries—"

"I injured! Just look at me!"

And she sprung up, to prove that he need have no concern as to her fitness for travel.

"My dear Miss Gran—"

A reproachful look from her caused him to correct himself:

"Miss Maude! I cannot, indeed I cannot accept such a sacrifice from you. I was brutally thoughtless to express my annoyance, when I should have considered only you. And truly it is nothing. Why, I have staid by the month in places that this is Paradise to! Besides, I have run across a friend here who will make the time pass gayly—I assure you, gayly! I have come now to prepare you for a—for a visit from him."

"A stranger!" cried Maude, with momentary dismay. "But then, a friend of yours. Of course I shall be delighted. I was only thinking of my appearance."

And she ran over her dress with a critical eye.

"In a—a professional way, of course," stammered Tom, reddening furiously.

Indeed, he was so overcome at the audacity of the lie that was trembling on his lips that he came to a dead halt.

"I—I don't understand," murmured Maude, gazing at him with gazelle-like inquiry. "What can you mean?"

"As a—physician, you know, of course I am anxious—in short, to have his opinion, before I—I allow you to—"

"Nonsense! I never was better in my life. I shall be glad to see your friend as your friend, of course; but as a doctor—"

And Maude shrugged her shoulders, and made a provokingly pretty mouth.

"We will let him decide. Remember, I have to account to your father for my care of you."

And Tom got out of the room as quickly as possible, feeling as if he should smother.

The moment the door closed behind him, Maude stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth, to prevent his hearing her laugh.

"I'll fix him, and his doctor!" she cried, gayly.

Instantly she set Guillemma to watch at one window, while she watched at another, to see where Tom betook himself.

Her window commanded the way to the casa, but it was Guillemma who made the first discovery.

"Senorita! senorita! behold!"

"What is it? what is it?" cried Maude, rushing off to her attendant.

"He has met his friend. Ah! you are too late."

"Where! where! What was he like?"

"They have passed round the corner of the house."

"Quick! quick! Take me to some window on that side of the house, where I can see and hear without being discovered! This bracelet is yours if I overhear their conversation!"

Guillemma fairly dragged her mistress off through a corridor, and down a stairway, half-way down which they stopped, breathlessly, close to a window the view through which was obstructed by the foliage of a densely growing vine.

Here Maude could hear the voices of Tom Templeton and Charley Osborne, without being able to see the speakers.

What she overheard filled her with delight, and she shook her pretty fist in their direction with gay menace.

His head in a whirl, Tom had met his friend, to drag him around the corner of the house, out of sight from Maude's window.

"Oh, Charley!" he cried. "I've got you in a fix, along with myself! I've been lying like a—like a sewing-machine agent! But I was cornered; and if you don't stand by me, the jig's up! I'll go hang myself!"

"Stand by you? Of course I will! You can't stall me by saying anything that I won't swear to."

"Heaven bless you! You're my good angel! But that won't make you a doctor!"

And Tom groaned.

"A doctor? What do you want of a doctor?"

"To convince that—that angel that she's too ill to travel!"

"Ha! ha! ha! Is that all? Have you been trying to persuade her?"

"Haven't I! But it's a test of generosity between us, and she has developed a degree of self-sacrifice that would stock a whole calendar of saints."

"She can't beat you, I'll bet."

And Charley shook with laughter.

"But that's neither here nor there," declared Tom. "You're to look at her tongue, and feel her pulse, and all the rest of it, and—Oh, Charley! swear that she has received some internal injury, of a kind that don't develop itself all at once. Rest, that's the thing—absolute rest for a day or two is indispensable. That infernal stage-driver has got an old axle to serve in the place of the broken one, and we're to be off at ten. Heaven help us! it's eight already!"

Charley scratched his head.

"What if she scouts my diagnosis?" he demanded. "From what you have told me of her, I gather that she is a very determined young lady."

"Say, Charley, I'll tell you what you do," said Tom, pathetically. "You give her an opiate of some kind. Tell her she's to lie down, and you'll see her again at ten. If then she's in condition to travel, you'll give your consent—your professional consent, of course."

Charley pulled a long face.

"An opiate?" he said. "What do I know about opiates? I took a few drops of laudanum once, but it was for ear-ache. It was dropped into my ear, warm!"

"Oh, you can make it a morphine powder. One won't hurt her."

"But what do you want to give her an opiate for?"

"To get her to sleep till the coach is gone. And you bet I'll have Billy Boston out of this town on the dot, ten sharp!"

"There's no other stage for a week."

"Thank God for that!"

"Well, here's a famous plot. You must have met your angel this morning."

"Don't mention it, Charley! My heart is now a lump of ice, and now a ball of fire! My matin piety was rewarded by a spectacle to

make the angels weep—with envy! I am living through the day on the bewildering hope that my vesper, yet scarcely less earthly, devotion will be crowned by a vision to—warm the cockles of the hearts of men!"

"What! Do you mean to tell me that the daughter of that true-blue old Don has actually flirted with you in church?"

"Flirted! She? Go pluck out your slanderous tongue! In the church I saw a saint, with her serene eyes turned heavenward; at the fandango I hope to meet a woman, with her glorious vision condescending to a poor worm of earth!"

"But I'll tell you all about it while the apothecary is putting up our dose. What we want, is one powder of morphine, and the rest of pulverized sugar. We'll combine homeopathy with allopathy!"

"Well, considering that I am the doctor, it seems to me that you are doing a fair share of the prescribing!"

And the friends went off laughing.

But, shaking her doll-like fist after them, the eavesdropper muttered, quite as gleefully:

"He laughs best who laughs last!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN AMATEUR DOCTOR.

WHEN the plotters approached Maude's apartments, they heard her strumming on a guitar and singing as gayly as a lark.

"Bless us!" cried Charley. "What a patient, to persuade that she is hovering on the brink of the grave!"

"Charley, if you fail me, I'll kill myself, and leave you undying remorse!"

"How does a doctor look? How'll this do?"

He looked grave enough when he was ushered into Miss Maude's presence.

Her eyes were sparkling defiantly, but at sight of him her whole face underwent a subtle change.

While he was bowing, with his eyes on the floor, the fact being that it required not a little effort to look her squarely in the face after the first glance, she was holding her breath, with her hand lifted to her heart.

Charley Osborne was saying, in every fiber of his being:

"That angel!"

Maude, in her secret soul, was aspiring:

"Ah! what a superb fellow! If he looks at me again, he'll have a case of heart-disease on his hands!"

He did look at her again, and Tom was delighted at the docility with which she submitted her tongue and her pulse to inspection.

Then the merry devils of mischief set her to laughing, while she assured the mock physician that she really had no need of his ministrations.

She gave Tom ten minutes of agonizing suspense, and then filled his heart with secret gratitude, by submitting outwardly to the doctor's advice.

Tom drew Guillemma out of the door, and pressing a golden bribe into her unresisting hand, begged her by no means to disturb the senorita's repose, if she was asleep when the time for the departure of the coach arrived.

As soon as the door closed upon her, he gave his friend a delighted hug, crying:

"I'll love you to the hour of my death!"

"And I'll shoot you on sight—hang me if I don't!" returned Charley. "What sort of a scrape have you got me into?"

"You? None at all. She'll never know."

"Never know!" echoed Osborne. "I'll know! And I'll never be able to look her in the face like an honest man!"

"But you're not required to—that is to say, not after this week."

Charley groaned more dismally than ever.

"Heaven help me, no! I don't deserve ever to touch the hem of her garments!"

"Charley! Charley! what in the world is the matter with you? What do you mean?"

And Tom stared in bewilderment.

"I mean that you have cut me off from all chance of ever knowing the brightest angel that ever—that ever—Oh, hang it all! What's the use of talk? The thing's done!"

Tom blew a prolonged whistle.

"You don't mean it?" he ejaculated, in amazement.

"Much good it will do me, whether I mean it or not!" groaned Osborne.

Tom reflected a moment, and then ventured:

"Say, old man! maybe this ain't so bad, after all."

"Go enjoy your ill-gotten gains; but don't talk to me!"

"Listen! You ungrateful dog! the gods, using me as their instrument, have dropped your happiness at your feet. If she takes that confounded powder all right, and we get the coach off, won't you have her at your mercy for a week? As her medical adviser! What do you want better than that? It's as good as being her spiritual adviser, or the next thing to it! And but for me, you would never have had a show at all! I've a mind to go back and tell her that, on reflection, you have concluded that she had better dispense with the powder, and go on with coach at ten!"

"Tom, do you think I'd have a show?" cried his friend, seizing his hand.

They found Billy Boston, and bribed him not to bring the coach before the *fonda* when he was ready to start, and also to set out on the stroke of ten if they did not make their appearance with the lady.

Billy made his cheek bulge in a way calculated to awaken a suspicion that his quid was reinforced by his tongue, and winked just perceptibly.

Then the friends had an hour and a half of anxious suspense before them.

If they had only known that, having tossed their powder into the slop-jar, Miss Maude had hugged herself gayly, exclaiming:

"Such eyes, and such a noble bearing! A compounder of pills! Faugh! He's a prince in disguise! I—I think I do begin to feel the effects of that shock—to my nerves! Ha! ha! ha! I snan't be able to go with the coach—poor me!"

And she danced gayly all round her bewildered attendant.

When her escort and her physician called to ask after her, they were told that she was reposing.

Charley turned pale.

"You—you don't suppose," he cried, in his anxiety seizing Guillemma's arm, "that she—that she can be sleeping too—too soundly? My good woman, you really don't suppose—"

"Like an infant, senor."

And Guillemma turned her wicked black eyes upon Tom, with what Charley believed to be a significant look.

"We won't disturb her," said Tom, quickly.

"See that she has every care when she awakes.

Above all things, let her have her sleep out." Assuring him of her devotion to his wishes, Guillemma closed the door, and the two friends stood looking into each other's faces.

"Saved!" cried Tom. "Old man, we're the happiest dogs this side the Water-shed."

"We're a brace of cold-blooded murderers!" retorted Charley. "Oh, Tom, I'll never forgive you! She's dying in there! Didn't you notice the look that old hag gave you? She believes we are plotting her death, and she sold herself to you."

"For five dollars?"

"Fifty cents would do it! What do these devils care for life?"

"Nonsense! The girl's all right."

"The minute that stage is out of sight, I'm coming back here, and I'll wake her up, if I have to tear the house down!" declared Charley.

"What a love of a man he is!" cried Maude, who, with her rosy ear at a crevice in the wall, overheard this half-whispered dialogue. "If I don't tease the life out of him, I'll know the reason."

Charley was as good as his word. He found the beauty lying rather languidly on the divan in her sitting-room, in the most bewitching of wrappers.

How white she was! how large and timidly trusting her eyes!

"Do you think I am going to be ill, doctor?" she asked. "And how good of you. To—ah—Mr. Templeton, not to be disappointed about the coach. I did try to bear up."

And with a little wince, as of pain, she put her hand to her side.

"If I see any signs of—of—anything alarming," panted poor Charley. "I'll have suitable consultation, of course. We have a physician here, Miss Granville, of—of more years experience than myself. A man in whom, I may say, I have every confidence. One who—who would be an honor to the profession in any city. He is buried—actually buried, out here. But I congratulate you and—and myself on the accessibility of his services, at this critical moment."

A cold perspiration stood on Charley's brow.

"Will you let me take the balance of the powders?" he said, with a sudden thought. "I see—ah—from the looks of your—ah—tongue, that you need no more. What you want now, is rest and—and careful nursing."

Tom got the "doctor" away as soon as possible.

"Confound you!" he cried. "You have lost the little sense the Lord originally endowed you with! In five minutes you would have given the whole thing away! A consultation! Pah!"

"But, good heavens, Tom! the responsibility—the perfectly awful responsibility! Have I got all of the rest of those accursed powders? One! two! three! four! five! six! seven! Do you remember how many there were? Was it twelve, or only ten?"

"How many have you got there? Nine? Of course it was ten. I remember it distinctly."

"Tom, on my soul I believe it was twelve."

"Well, well! what's the odds? The girl's awake; so there's no harm done. She won't take any more."

"We can't be sure of that, Tom. And then, maybe that wasn't morphia! That infernal rascal is a blundering old fool! I'll bet all I'm worth he has poisoned her! Did you ever see such a change in any one in all your life? I hardly knew her!"

And Charley groaned and fairly wrung his hands.

"Gammon!" scoffed Tom. "You can go and watch over her this evening, and if you dis-

cover in her any symptoms more alarming than those you yourself are developing so rapidly, you can send for me at the fandango."

And in delighted anticipation, he was very near cutting a pigeon's wing.

Charley did better than Tom advised. He made his third professional call of that day almost immediately after dinner, and spent two of the most bitter-sweet hours of his life.

When he finally got up to go, he assured Maude that all she needed was continued rest and nursing, and made an appointment for a fourth call that evening, ostensibly to keep his patient cheered up.

Then he went, leaving behind him a girl holding her sides with laughter, and an old woman who thought that these Americans were the strangest people she had ever seen.

When he presented himself in the evening, "got up to kill," Guillemma met him at the door, and, with a wooden face, told him that the senorita begged to be excused. She was feeling so well that she was sure she had no pressing need of his services; but she had retired, and would be grateful for his attendance in the morning.

Having thus the time on his hands, and being in a toilet the effect of which it was a pity to throw away, Charley concluded to go to the fandango.

There he met with an adventure which proved that, like the rest of us erring mortals, he was not free from human weakness. Alas, poor humanity!

CHAPTER V.

LOVE AND THE LOCKSMITH.

If Francisca Monteiro da Rocha had been as saintly as her lover's fancy painted her, she would have been of very little use in the rough-and-tumble of this earthly life.

Instead she had an eye in her head for the good points of a fine specimen of manhood, and she at a glance recognized her ideal in Tom Templeton.

She knew that Senor Alverado Saumarez looked upon her as his own peculiar property, and that he held himself in readiness to do battle for her against all pretenders to her favor.

She knew, too, that he was so desperate a fellow that, while she had admirers on every hand, but two had thus far had the hardihood to openly contest his claim.

One had been the commander of a company of Mexican lancers, a dashing fellow, with the blue blood of Castile in his veins—the one man of her own people who had most nearly captivated the senorita's virgin fancy.

He had gone down under Saumarez's rapier, which was found to have pierced a lace handkerchief, as fine as a spider's web, which bore the fair Francisca's monogram.

With a brutality which savored of the Middle Ages, Saumarez returned this token to its owner, presenting it on his sword-point, incarnadined with the life-blood of her lover.

Deep in his vindictive heart, he always harbored the belief that the ill-fated lancer had held this memento with the knowledge and consent of the object of his devotion.

The other was scarcely more than a headstrong boy, a younger son of a noble English house—one of those adventurous spirits who try to repair in a new world the iniquitous inequalities of the old.

His hot blood had hurried him into a street fight, in which he was fairly riddled with bullets, but not till he had planted one so near to a vital spot in Saumarez's body, that he lay for weeks on the very brink of the grave.

"Three times and out!" had been the popular passing upon this encounter. "The next man that tackles Alverado Saumarez will use him up!"

Yet no one, thus far, had cared to test the truth of this prognostic, with even the fair Francisca as the prize.

So the girl needed no further warning that the lover who would win his way to her feet must come with his life in his hand. Yet she would have scorned the man who, loving her, would have accepted safety at the cost of her love.

Was she not ready to brave her father's anger, and the ostracism of all her natural friends, to reward her fearless hero with a life of sweet devotion?

The old Don, seeing that power must surely slip from the hands of his race, longed to have some representative of his own blood among the last to succumb. Saumarez was his brother's son, and bade fair to be a ruler of men best able to withstand the sinister tendency of the time.

Even more than the anger of her father, Francisca had good reason to fear that she ran the risk of her life, should her cousin see that she was inevitably lost to him.

Yet never for a moment had she entertained the thought of yielding herself a victim to his tyrannous passion.

How often, with her supple figure rigid with superb scorn, and her magnificent eyes alight with proud confidence, had she said to her exultant heart:

"Some day—some day the conqueror will come! Ah! how I will go out to him!"

And now, returning from her adventure of the hornet-stung burro and him, fleet of foot and strong of arm, who had held her for one transcendent moment against the mighty pulsations of his heart, she threw herself into the arms of her one confidante, in a flood of impassioned tears.

Chiquita was a little fraud. It was true that she had a devoted slave by the name of Gomez; but the note addressed to him was never intended for his eye.

She asked no awkward questions that must be answered in blushes. She did better than that. She took it for granted that this exhibition of feeling could have but one meaning.

She whispered a thousand delightful prophecies into the hungry ears of her mistress. Watching for her return on the housetop, she had seen the runaway and its issue.

And with what signs of admiration, what hugs and kisses of congratulation, did she fan the flame of Francisca's love!

"But of what avail?" sighed the unhappy Francisca. "Am not I a prisoner here, as in a dungeon of the Inquisition? Who that passes by, but keeps on without knowledge of my existence?"

"Of what use the church?" cried Chiquita, as if its chief use were to facilitate the intrigues of lovers. "And is not to-morrow the blessed Sabbath?"

"Ah, little one! but is it lawful?" breathed Francisca, crossing herself nervously.

By the great bound of hope which her heart gave, she feared that the tempter was seeking to betray her into sacrilege.

Chiquita scouted such nice scruples.

"Shall we all die old maids?" she demanded.

"And Benita," suggested Francisca.

"Benita!" cried the little maid. "She is given us but to add to the sport! Trust me!"

"Ah! what can I give you, joy of my heart! I have a comb that even Benita has not seen; but, alas! it was given me by Alverado. I dare not provoke him by letting him see that I have parted with it lightly."

"Give me your love. No one can grudge that," answered Chiquita, kissing her.

"But this is not all," she pursued, her eyes brightening and deepening, as she plunged into the intricacies of a plot which was taking shape in her versatile brain. "There is a fandango to-morrow night."

"A fandango! Ah, Chiquita, we dare not! But more than that, it will be impossible. If—if he remain,"—and the dropping of her voice to a low, delicious murmur, and the deep crimson that dyed face and neck, showed who was meant—"the vigilance of their watching will be redoubled. You should have seen the hatred in my cousin's eyes. He has Benita in his pay. She is a slave to his slightest wish. She will not sleep away from me."

"Ha! you have given me my cue!" cried Chiquita, jumping up to dance about the room, and then suddenly falling upon her mistress and friend, and devouring her with congratulatory kisses.

"What is it? what is it?" asked Francisca, eagerly.

"She will not sleep away from you? So be it! But she will sleep, and you away from her!"

"I do not understand!"

"Listen! Is not Chiquita an affectionate little thing? Who so loves to roll cigarrettes for grandam Benita, whose hands, tremulous with years of beneficence, begin to drop the tobacco? She will take the cigarrettes, swearing to grant me not the slightest favor I may ask. She will call me a little liar and cheat. But will she know of the few grains of magical powder mixed with her tobacco? And when she is snoring as only wicked old wretches like her ever snore—ah, Francisca! I have a secret from even you!"

"From me, Chiquita!" reproachfully. "And I confide to you everything!"

"Ah!" cried the little maid, putting her hands palm to palm, and leaning her cheek against the back of one of them, while she drew her shoulders forward like a delighted child, her eyes fairly dancing with exultation at her own naughtiness, "you will shrink from me in terror! You will force me upon my knees before the holy father! Think! I cannot make confession while I have it in my possession!"

"It? What? Oh, Chiquita!"

"Make the cross over your ear before I breathe the little devil into it! Now! A ladder—a rope ladder! I teased Gomez to get me the sticks, and I wove the silken cord myself. When I showed it to him, and explained how the noble Rudolfo visited the lady Costenza in her balcony, he scoffed, and swore that it would not hold his great toe. Imagine the brute!—he would fetch the garden ladder, if it would please me! But, whether his great toe or not, it will hold us. I have tried it!"

Francisca was aghast.

"Ah, my Chiquita! what is not in that naughty little head of thine!"

"All delightful wickedness, sweet Francisca! The elves whisper it to me in my sleep. Am I to blame? But we will go to the fandango—or lose our lover!"

Francisca covered her face with her hands.

But in a little while she had her hot cheek against that of the little maid, and was sighing her undying gratitude into her ear.

"We are all alike, my dear, when we are tempted!" laughed the knowing little maid.

So said, so done! The affair at the church went off to Chiquita's entire satisfaction.

"Did I not tell you?" she cried, the moment she was alone with her mistress. "He is a worldling!—the wickedest of the wicked! Ha! ha! ha! How well he must have kept in practice! There! there! forgive me! He is a chevalier without reproach; and it is I that am possessed of a thousand devils! But would you have him a fool? An imbecile, who had been all his life as afraid as Saint Anthony of women, and had never looked at a pretty girl without crossing himself, would have spoiled everything by trying to bribe Benita. Not he, the innocent! He returned my handkerchief with a polite—'I kiss your feet, most noble senora!' Ha! ha! ha! It is necessary to tell him nothing!"

"Oh, Chiquita!" breathed her mistress, turning suddenly pale, "do you suppose that he—that he—suspected that I—that—"

"Little fool!" cried the maid. "He knows that you adore him!"

"Oh! oh! oh!"

And Francisca was overcome.

"Well, then," exclaimed Chiquita, "it is not our sins, but their detection! Is it not true that you would give your two eyes for him?"

"Ah! into what shame have you betrayed me! It is I, a maiden, who have bid him come to me!"

"Console yourself!" said Chiquita, with a shrug. "Maids or widows, we all do it, one way or another. And would you have him think you of such poor taste as to look with disfavor on a prince of men such as he must know himself to be? Depend upon it, the women of his own country have not left him in ignorance of his attractions!"

"I can never look in his face again!"

"But you have not, even so far, sweet soul! I have been but teasing you, my Francisca. How could you think otherwise than that it is I, a meddling match-maker, on pins and needles to forward his romantic suit? You? He believes you a saint, with no thought less white than your devotion to Our Lady."

"Ah! do you think that, Chiquita?—do you really think that?"

And the little maid laughed, prophesying that Tom Templeton himself would settle that point before the moon rose to spy upon his love-making.

When it came time to administer Benita's quietus, Chiquita sat at the old duenna's feet with the winning smiles of the little hypocrite she was.

The dragon took the cigarettes with grunting churlishness, and rewarded the giver by refusing the trifling indulgence she asked, as a mask for her real aims; and instead recommended her to penance for hypocrisy.

She was soon snoring like a pagan, when Chiquita danced about her, flaunting her gay fandango dress before her closed eyes, and recounting the joys that awaited sweet maids, who were shrewd enough and bold enough to snatch them from the hands of Fate, in the person of a sour old duenna, who had lived so many hundred years that she had long ago forgotten even her own youth, if indeed she had ever had any.

Then came the darkening of the room, and the descent from the window by means of Chiquita's rope-ladder, and the breathless stealing through the darkness to the town where the glimmering lights seemed like so many eyes on the watch for them.

A thousand conflicting emotions, now stopped, now accelerated, the beating of Francisca's heart, so that she who would have met death unflinchingly in a noble cause and in the face of all the world, was so unnerved by the stealth of intrigue that she clung to her companion, starting at every sound or shifting shadow, her trembling limbs almost refusing their support.

As for the little maid, she was in her element!—she who screamed at a mouse, or wept when detected in a fault.

A thousand times had Chiquita to assure her fainting mistress that no one could penetrate their disguise—no one but argus-eyed Love! Francisca felt every glance stab her to the heart!

With eyes upon the ground she flitted along the street, quivering as if stung at some merry gibe from a passer-by.

And the fandango! Ah! the music, the eddying throng, the peering glances, the challenges of those who sought to surprise some suspected mask into a betrayal of identity!

And he! Was he there? Would he know her? Would he claim her? Not daring to look up, she shrunk from every one who brushed by her, dreading the touch of his hand, the vibrating of his voice through every fiber of her being!

But you may believe that the little maid was on the lookout, as they passed round and round the ball, interweaving with the merry crowd.

Presently she gave a quick start.

"Ah! it is he! Look! look! Ha! ha! ha! He is fooled! Not that one, my bold lover! On my

soul, he is making love to every mask in the room! Was there ever such a Don Juan?"

"Hush! hush! for heaven's sake, hush!" breathed Francisca, trying to put her hand over her chattering companion's mouth.

Though the words were whispered into her ear with all needful caution, it seemed to her as if the whole world must hear them.

CHAPTER VI.

CARRIED BY STORM.

"SIMPLETON!" cried Chiquita. "Don't you see that no one can possibly discover us?—not even he! Alas for your boasted lover's instinct! Like all true chivalry, that is a thing of the past!"

"And my cousin," whispered Francisca. "Do you see him?"

"No. He is not here. But let us not speak of him, or, like the Evil One, his master, he will appear to us!"

Then Francisca plucked up courage to look where her companion indicated, and her heart leaped into her throat, and then sunk like lead, as she saw Tom Templeton bending with burning glances over a gay masquerader, evidently trying to penetrate her disguise.

She was equally pained by his devotion, and by the coquettish airs with which the woman baffled his curiosity while luring him on till he was almost convinced that he had found her of whom he was in quest.

"Ah! does he think me so bold!" breathed Francisca, the blood mounting hot to her cheeks under her mask.

Of course she could not know that he was looking, not for her, but for the little maid.

Then came a surge of glad hope, as Tom abandoned his partner with a look of disappointment, and renewed his search over the mottled throng.

"At last!" panted Chiquita, with a spasmodic jerk on the arm of her mistress. "He has his eye upon us! He is making his way toward—Ah! what is the matter with you?"

In a choking voice Francisca whispered:

"Oh, no! no! Let us evade him—for a moment! Give me a moment!"

"Did ever the blessed saints look down upon such a simpleton!" cried Chiquita. "Well, on second thought, you are a cute one. If we run away, he will be the more likely to run after us. For losing no points, recommend me to a prim miss who wouldn't play the coquette for—"

"Hush! oh, hush!"

Tom had got his eyes on them at last, and the struggle between Chiquita and her mistress, the former to throw herself in his way, and the latter to shrink from notice, made his heart leap.

"Ah! now I have you, my pretty one!" he cried within himself. "Was ever anything so exquisite? To think that, having once seen that contour, those movements, I could have cast a second glance in doubt at any other!"

Boldly he pressed toward them, and though Francisca dragged her companion away all in a panic, yet Chiquita glanced back over her shoulder with an arch allurements which no mask could disguise.

"Fair ladies, whither away in such precipitate flight? Am I to lose you as soon as found, after hours, ages of devoted search?"

Chiquita turned, shaking free the arm to which her mistress clung; then Francisca faced him, like a gazelle at bay, if he could but have seen her dilated, appealing eyes through her mask.

With the informality permitted at such an assemblage, he pressed between them, offering an arm on either side.

Chiquita was prompt in her acceptance, and confiding in the firm grip of her little hand. Her mistress had a moment of almost swooning hesitancy, and then she touched his arm with a pressure so light that it only conveyed to him the tremor that shook her from head to foot.

"Ah! you rogue!" whispered the now confident and delighted Tom, bending till his lips were at Chiquita's ear, "do you want Gomez to stab me in the back? He is inconsolable! He swears that you are untrue! Have pity on him—and me!"

It needed not the little maid's titter to assure him that he was all right at last!

He drew her note from his vest-pocket, and held it up tauntingly before her face.

She snatched it from him as quick as a flash!

With a laugh he bent now toward his own true love, not heeding that the little maid withdrew her hand from his arm, and disappeared in the throng, leaving her mistress to his tender mercies.

"My dear senorita!" he whispered into her shrinking yet hungry ear, "pardon me! pity me! Say that you were not hurt! You know that I was not frightened away from you by the truculent frown of the pretty gentleman who claimed you? I did not sleep, nor have a moment's rest, till I saw you out, looking as well as beautiful. Alas, you did not vouchsafe me a single glance, though I had glances for none but you! And I have not had a moment's rest since! Pardon me! pity me! If you only knew!"

It was not necessary to look into his impas-

sioned face. His voice vibrated through her as music sets the strings of an untouched harp atremble!

She could not have found voice to answer him, even if the situation had not justified silence.

His strong hand had closed over hers, that lay on his arm like a fluttering bird; and she had perforce to cling to him for support, so was she overcome by the dizzy whirl of her emotions.

This was as she had longed to be wooed. Here was a man who stopped for no conventional proprieties, for brevity of acquaintance, or choice of speech. At the first opportunity, his soul rushed from his lips to her heart, carrying it by storm!

It was a relief to her that the music now struck up a slow, voluptuous mazourke, such as the children of the sun love best; and the promiscuous throng resolved itself into gracefully gyrating couples of dancers.

Tom passed his arm about her waist; and like one floating through space in a dream she wended the mazes of that, of all dances, most suited to love.

Tom Templeton was as gallant as he was brave, as graceful as gallant. If there was a corner of her heart unconquered before, in that moment he won it!

The familiar movements she followed mechanically at first, but with a gradual recovery of her wonted self-possession, as the delight of gliding to the voluptuous rhythm of the music soothed her as nothing else could.

When the dance was over, she could glance shyly up into Tom's face, and gather from its impassioned expression sweet assurance of the sincerity of his exclamation:

"Senorita, you dance like the fabled houri!"

On the plea of heat, he led her from the crowded room, out upon a piazza which ran along the back of the house.

Other lovers were strolling in a garden planted there, but Tom led his beloved to an end of the piazza which, overgrown by a thick vine, afforded a nook from which every bar of treacherous light was jealously excluded.

Here he brought her artificially cooled wine.

"Through my mask?" she whispered, so faintly that no cadence of her natural voice could possibly be caught.

"But you can remove it here."

"Oh, senor!"

"But no one can see you. Even I, who so long for one glimpse of your dear face, can not make out a single lineament! Let me remove the mask."

"Senor! senor! I have trusted you."

"And you can trust me still, to replace it at your slightest command, with no attempt to violate your wishes?"

"Oh, I do believe that you would not look till I bade you!" exclaimed Francisca, with an earnestness that betrayed the going out of her heart to him. "But an accident, senor!"

And she laughed archly.

"But have I not seen it already? Ah! shall I ever forget the holy serenity—"

"You still insist that you know me, senor!"

"Nay! that I love you! I cannot hope for the supreme happiness of knowing you as you are, even in a lifetime passed at your side. Every day will have its revelation of some new loveliness, of face, of form, of mind, of heart!"

His burning words left her speechless with tremulous delight and timidity. It was as if he had already appropriated her!

"Trust me!" he whispered, again essaying to undo her mask; and she did not repulse him.

"Wait! wait! Let me retain it!" she panted.

And, removing it from her face only far enough to permit of her sipping the wine, she kept it as a screen from his eager eyes.

"Ah! you are cruel!" he breathed.

But she kept him at bay while she sipped the wine; then returning the glass to him, said:

"I have your promise—at my slightest command?"

"Yes! yes! But withhold your commands for one merciful moment!"

He took the glass from her, and set it on the window-ledge behind him, retaining possession of the hand not occupied in holding her mask in place, ready to be fastened. Then he began to plead.

"Ah! can you be so cruel, knowing that the darkness hides your sweet face as effectually as any mask? The moon will not be up for an hour yet, even if it could penetrate this covert."

"If what you say is true, then the mask were as well on as off; and it is safer so."

"As well on as off—that icy barrier?" he cried, in amazed protest. "If the flame in my heart had touched yours, you would not say so, senorita. Say rather, for the purpose of disguise, it were as well off as on. Ah, let me put it here, close within your reach. So!"

For he had overcome her opposition, and been permitted to draw the mask away and place it beside her on the bench which held them.

Then—ah, then! With no longer any barrier save her coyness, he drew nearer and nearer, till the breath of his hurried words struck warm on her cheek; till he felt her fluttering within the arm that stole about her, she scarcely knew when.

She heard her name, quivering with tender

reverence as it took its flight from his lips; and then—

One long moment of heaven—and she broke away.

"Senor, you are ungenerous!" she sobbed.

Was ever so gentle a reproach for a stolen kiss!

He fell upon his knees at her feet, seizing upon her hands as they lay helplessly in her lap, and bowing his face upon them.

"Forgive me! forgive me!" he pleaded.

Yet instantly broke out in a rapturous:

"But, oh, you are mine beyond recall! You have the seal of my love upon you forever and forever!"

Was it so? The thought, instead of the tumultuous intoxication she would have forecast, brought a blissful serenity.

So she was his, and he hers, as far as they two could join in mutual dedication.

But Saumarez! What of him?

These two would meet in deadly combat. She had not a moment's doubt of that. Did the thought fill her heart with shrinking solicitude for the one she loved?

She withdrew one of the hands to the tender palms of which he was pressing his lips in rapturous alternation, to place it on his bowed head, passing it over his hair with a tender, caressing touch.

He knew then that his offense was forgiven, though it would never be forgotten by either of them!

He lifted his face, with all the impetuosity of his passion gone out of him. He was lost in wonder at his good-fortune, now it was truly his; and was suddenly seized with a great humility as he looked back upon his daring.

With one hand still lingering on his head, she bent toward him, smiling through the darkness, and said, with a pathetic tremor in her voice, as if between playfulness and tears:

"Now, senor, I command you!"

And so she placed the mask before her face, murmuring:

"Alas, now, when it is too late!"

He seated himself beside her, and gently tied the mask in place.

Then they sat hand in hand, thinking of neither the past nor the future, but basking in grateful silence, in the blissful present, till Tom bent nearer, and preferred a tender petition.

"Call me Tom, Francisca!"

And simply, as if this strange, new relation were as old as recollection, she yielded him this wish—and more!

For, speaking for the first time in his mother tongue, she responded:

"Tom—dear Tom!"

"Good heavens! You can speak English?" he cried, in an ecstasy of astonishment.

"My aunt was an Englishwoman," she answered, still in a speech that made all of her sweet words sweetest. "She taught me."

"God bless her!" cried Tom, in wondering delight at the purity of her accent, only toned to richer music by a Spanish shading here and there. "But, what aunt?"

And she, very gently, as if loth to mar this first moment of their heart-union, yet perforce, answered:

"Alverado's mother!"

"Ah!" breathed Tom, as if a flash of lightning had suddenly revealed the portentous future to him.

But before he could make any movement, if, indeed, he would have done so, Francisca suddenly shrunk into his arms with a low cry of alarm.

The sounds that had fallen upon her ear were a stealthy footstep, and the low murmur of a man's voice, and an impatient:

"Sh!"

Tom Templeton needed no posting as to the degree or nature of the peril attending his courtship of the lovely daughter of old Don Jose Monteiro da Rocha, whose fame had reached him hundreds of miles away, and long before he dreamed of ever being the happy suitor for such a prize. Nor had the tragic story of her guardianship by the red-handed Alverado lagged behind.

But if a viper was lurking in his Eden, he preferred to set his heel upon its head at once, and so sprung promptly to his feet, to be restrained by the clinging arms of his terrified lady-love.

"Oh, no! no! no! Not now! not now!" she pleaded, in a low, hoarse murmur of agonized supplication. "It is my cousin! He will kill you! You do not know. He is surrounded by his bravos!"

And then, once more, in English, that sweetest, most irresistible of appeals:

"Tom! Dear Tom!"

CHAPTER VII.

CONFISCATION.

WHEN Maude Granville sent word to Charley Osborne that she had retired, she was guilty of one of those equivocations which society people have taxed their ingenuity to the utmost, with very questionable success, to make square with the Ninth Commandment.

She compounded with her conscience, as many

people do, by lying on her bed while Guillemma was making the statement, as if to have the word literally true in one sense would redeem the deception of the meaning actually conveyed.

Such lying as this has been indulged in by prince, priest, and peasant, probably since the world began.

The fact was, that the moment she learned of the fandango, she began to plot to secure an evening of novel enjoyment for herself, while gratifying her curiosity as to Tom Templeton's passion for the beautiful Spaniard.

Besides this, she said to herself:

"I'll test the sincerity of Charley Osborne's apparent devotion to me."

Guillemma threw up her hands in dismay, when the indispensability of a suitable fancy dress was pressed upon her.

"And mind," cried Maude, "it must be equal in richness and beauty to any that can possibly be there. I won't be outshone by even Don Jose's daughter, if she should be present."

"The Senorita Francisca!" cried Guillemma.

"Impossible! She is not allowed—"

"Never mind what she is allowed. The question is, where can you get me a dress?"

"At an hour's notice? The senorita thinks me a fairy godmother."

"We have all day before us," corrected Maude—"an hour to get the dress, and the rest of the day to fit it to me, and to make such changes as I think advisable. I have no great opinion of the taste of you Mexican women; and I won't be a dowdy, even to have my costume faultlessly correct."

"But, sen—"

"But me no buts! Here is the lever that moves the world. Fetch me a costume, if you have to steal one from your wonderful Francisca's own wardrobe."

And Maude emptied her purse into Guillemma's astonished, yet covetous hands.

The gold had a stimulating effect on Guillemma's fertility of resource.

"I have a niece," she said, after a moment's reflection—"a piquant little thing, though a sad coquette. If her mother has permitted her to think of going to the fandango, she will be sure to have raiment as gaudy as a butterfly's wings. My sister will oblige me with this dress when I tell her of your pressing need; and no doubt a season of penitence will do the hussy Perside more good than the fandango; though she will cry her pretty eyes out, poor little thing!"

"Say no more!" cried Maude, loftily. "Bundle that dress up, and fetch your Perside to me. I will undertake to dry her tears."

"On second thought," she added, "bring her mother, too. And see to it that there is no blabbing to her neighbors. For yourself, please to remember that I never forget any save those who blunder in serving me."

With protestations of faithfulness that Maude unceremoniously cut short, Guillemma hurried away, blessing all the saints that they had sent this imperious young princess to make her fortune.

She was gone a full hour, yet returned with a huge bundle loosely put together, as was suitable with finery liable to crumpling.

She was attended by a woman, as ugly, though somewhat younger than herself, and a young girl whose face was hidden in the folds of her *robosa*.

Courtesying very low, the mother began to apologize for her daughter, and commanded her with some sharpness to reveal herself.

With a gesture of proud defiance the girl threw aside her *robosa*, disclosing a face stained with tears and savage with intense hatred, while her lithe little figure quivered from head to foot with rage.

It was plain that not till after a protracted struggle had she been brought into the presence of her despoiler, the furthest possible from reconciled to her disappointment.

Maude rose from where she was busy on her knees in the depths of a large trunk, and looked at her victim with a conciliatory smile.

"My dear," she said, "I am treating you shamefully, I know."

"I only long to kill you!" cried Perside, baring her clinched teeth with animal fierceness. "Look to yourself, senorita! I will be even with you some day!"

And though in her vindictive hatred she had plucked a wicked little stiletto pin from her hair at the beginning of her menace, she ended with a sob.

But her mother and Guillemma sprung before her, chattering wrathful reproaches at her, and humble apologies to their patron.

With no change in the expression of her face, Maude put them aside, and walked fearlessly up to the raging little tigress.

"My dear," she said, soothingly, "do you imagine that I would put such a disappointment upon you, and let only your mother profit by your sacrifice? Come here. Stand before this glass."

And she drew Perside up to a fine French-plate mirror, which she had taken from its place in one of her trunks, and set on her dressing-table; the fact being that Miss Maude was far too vain to trust to any chance looking-glass that she might run across in traveling.

Perside's face, albeit a pretty one ordinarily, was not a pleasant object for her own contemplation in its present state; and she yielded sulkily enough, hanging her head, and refusing to look at her reflection in the mercilessly truth-telling mirror.

But all this was changed, when Maude twined in her dark hair a string of those gray glass baubles which commonly pass under the name of a pearl necklace, and which are worn for their beauty rather than for their intrinsic value.

A piece of uncut silk was next taken from the trunk, and thrown over one shoulder of the astonished Perside.

"It is just the thing for your complexion, dear," purred Maude, as she stood off to observe the effect. "It was a present to me from a very foolish step-father, who hadn't the ghost of an idea as to what I could or could not wear. It will make up lovely, for you."

"For me!" gasped Perside, now glancing almost timidly at herself in the glass.

And into her olive cheek appeared a blush of delighted self-consciousness which showed how pretty she could be in moments of gratified vanity.

But in all the few golden years in which she had planned by day and dreamed at night over the adornment of the beauty which kindly nature had intrusted to her to set off to its best advantage, she had never dreamed of such magnificence as this!

"You will want lace for the throat and sleeve," said Maude.

And as if her trunk were a magician's hat, she drew forth a strip of fabricated spider's-web, to display its intricate pattern over the silk as a background.

Once more into the depths of the magical trunk, and, hey presto! a pair of slippers to match the rest of that wonderful toilet.

Then the two girls stood looking into each other's eyes, one smiling indulgently, the other now white and trembling with excitement.

Perside thought of Cinderella and her fairy godmother. But her benefactress was no hideous old beldam, but, if not the queen of the fairies, at any rate a being almost as young and quite as charming as herself.

All of a sudden, with a sob of mingled gratitude and remorse, she sunk down upon her knees at Maude's feet, seizing her skirts and burying her face in them.

"Oh, come, now!" cried Maude, lifting her up with some little embarrassment. "We're not more than quits at best. I have taken your gala dress away from you. It is no more than fair that I should make some sort of return."

"Ah! but these, senorita, to my rags! And you have not even seen them yet!"

"I have your aunt's word for them, dear; and it is enough only to see you, to believe that you could have nothing but what was pretty. Besides, they are only part of the payment I exact. I am cruel enough to insist upon your losing your evening at the fandango. You must not leave this room, on any pretext, till I return."

"Ah!" gasped Perside, her face instantly falling. "And Sancho?"

"So you have a Sancho?" laughed Maude. "And you have been counting upon a final conquest on this particular evening?"

Perside blushed, and cast a little frightened glance out of the corner of her eye at her mother.

"The villainous bandit!" muttered the mother, to herself. "It is Our Blessed Lady who has interposed to keep you at home! She shall have a candle; and you—ingrate gad-about!—you shall have those gay slippers well locked up, till the day that sees the care of you transferred to some honest man of my choosing!"

Perside, who was mercifully spared the hearing of this menace, sighed softly.

"But this is not the end of the world!" said Maude, consolingly. "There will be other fandangos. And an occasional disappointment makes one's lover all the more eager."

It is probable that Perside knew this as well as her adviser. At any rate, she did not contest the matter.

Then the bundle was opened; and when its treasures were displayed, Maude was almost as delighted as Perside had been.

"Oh, you little witch!" she cried, bugging her victim. "You are my good angel! See! I had forgotten a fan that goes with your silk."

And the trunk yielded this most formidable weapon of a coquette the world over.

Perside's eyes had glistened, and her lip quivered, at the sight of her confiscated plumage; but as she spread the fan and involuntarily raised it to her cheek, a forecast of future conquest filled her with a glow of exultant satisfaction.

Still she could not but return to tears, when Maude's implacable policy of running no risk of betrayal through gossiping propensities of her own sex, left her a prisoner with her mother and aunt for jailers.

As the evening wore on, and she pictured to herself the gayety and music and delicious strife—not always entirely successful!—of keeping importunate lovers within due bounds, in that paradise from which she was an exile, she would now chafe like a caged bird beating against its bars, and now sit with her apron thrown over

her head, deaf to the reproaches of her mother; who alternated these maternal lectures with calculations of her gains, present and prospective, out of the eccentricities of the lavish Americana.

Meanwhile Maude Granville, with a boldness that was strangely out of keeping with the role of timid *ingenue* which she generally played, found her way unescorted to the fandango.

There were other maskers who went thus alone—more indeed than would return home unattended!—and unceremoniously slipping her hand through the arm of the first one of these lorn damsels whom she chanced upon, Maude proposed that they go in together.

Once in the giddy whirl, she was not long in discovering both Tom Templeton and Charley Osborne, who, with several other Americans, carelessly competed, in their ordinary dress and without masks, with their Greaser rivals, who were disguised like the ladies.

It was in that moment when Tom had seized upon his *inamorata* as a hawk falls upon its prey.

"What a dead bore he will find this week of waiting, while I am recovering from my shock!" laughed Maude.

But that reminded her that her convalescence had been protracted by reason of the personal attractions of a certain young gentleman, who plainly needed looking after, if she did not wish to have the laugh against her.

Now, Charley Osborne was constant enough to the lady of his affections so long as she was on hand to prevent his fancy from wandering; but he was essentially a lady's man, and could never resist the appeal of a pair of bright eyes, whether languid or sparkling, in the absence of any counter attraction.

He was now wavering between three or four rival beauties, the arch grace of no one of whom sufficiently surpassed those of her competitors to fix his choice.

You may believe that our American coquette was not lacking in those arts which, without the betrayal of deliberate purpose, would attract attention to herself.

Charley rose at the first cast of her fly, and was hooked and landed with a dexterity which left the other pretty anglers swearing, like veritable unlucky fishermen, those little oaths which, like their cigarettes, are robbed of their offensiveness by the arch lips of Spanish women.

For one thrilling moment Maude believed that her escort must have recognized her. He was gazing at her with the same eager admiration which had set her heart to beating in that first moment when her "physician" was saying to himself that his patient was the most charming little person it had ever been his good fortune to meet.

Now there was one thing lacking—the difficult respect with which he had then bowed low before the American belle.

The fact was that, while a pretty Mexicana was in some degree taken out of his contemptuous category of "Greaser," yet Charley did not feel toward them as toward one of his own people.

"He thinks that I have descended to the level of this rabble," said Maude to herself, "and that he can therefore presume to indulge in familiarity!"

And she instantly stiffened herself, to give him a lesson on the difference betwixt tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee!

CHAPTER VIII.

COURTSHIP UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

BUT the instant Charley addressed her, which he lost no time in doing, Maude perceived that he took her for only a little Spanish beauty of more than usual attractiveness.

Now, as much as he had been among the Mexicans, Charley Osborne had learned but two things in Spanish—to swear, and to say, "I love you"—each in a half a dozen different ways. The former accomplishment he displayed in his intercourse with men, the latter was quite as indispensable in his association with women.

In spite of these rather narrow limitations, he was never wanting in volubility. Men or women, he talked English at them, forty to the dozen, and found that this, eked out by significant gesticulations, served very well. And this because the main thing was to convince the auditor, in the one case, that he was in dead earnest in his demand for instant action; in the other, that he thought her altogether the most lovely of her sex.

"Ah, my pretty gazelle!" he cried, the instant he had Maude's hand upon his arm, retaining her fingers in a fervent clasp, and we can perhaps best indicate by italicizing his lapses into Spanish, "*here I have been breaking my heart for you ever since my mother first trusted me to go home with the girls alone, long, long years before you were ever dreaming of me!*"

And his eyes looked tender reproach into hers.

"But I have you now, *little witch*," with a glance of arch triumph, "with your little brown paw *next to my heart*"—giving it a hug against him—"at the risk of getting more than I bargain for, if one of your blessed countrymen should happen to take it into his head to drive six inches of cold steel into my back!"

Maude could scarcely refrain from betraying, by her laughter, her comprehension of what he said; but assuming the mock indignation of a coquette who repels the exaggerated protestations of an admirer, she answered, speaking rapidly in Spanish, and trusting to luck not to say anything that he would understand:

"A pretty fellow you—to play the devoted all day to an *Americana*, and then fall at the feet of the first little brown squaw of a *Mexicana*, as you suppose, that you chance upon in the evening!"

"*Americana! Mexicana!*" cried Charley, these being the only words that had the least familiar sound to him.

And up went his brows with a wrinkle between them, as if nothing could be most cruelly preposterous than the charge that he could for a moment compare the pallid daughters of his own clime with the sun-kissed maids of Mexico.

But he voiced his protest somewhat incongruously, to this effect:

"You little devil! if you knew the *delicious little beauty* who has really *stolen my heart from me* this day, you would make a bigger row than that!"

And keeping right on, he urged:

"I know that you are a *divine dancer*, by the *grace of your walk*—and by your trim little figure, by Jove!"

"Good heavens, how remorseful I shall be—tomorrow! Can I look in the face of the *delight of my heart*, and tell her—not in words, oh, no! but by just such glances as these—I *love you, and you only!* I'm a bloody villain, and that's a fact! But it don't matter so much, with these little Injuns! If I don't do it, some other dog will. And *my one true love* will never know!"

If Charley had only known it, in no other way could he possibly have pleaded his cause so well. Maude was delighted with him. As she would have put it, she hated a man "with flies on him!"

"But I'll put you in training when I get hold of you!" she said aloud, in Spanish. "If I don't make you recall this outing with some twinges, I lose my guess!"

"Hang this confounded lingo!" replied Charley, gazing into his companion's face as if he would give the results of a month's labor to snatch her mask away and kiss her on the spot. "I mean to begin to learn it to-morrow! I'll have just one *sweet time* at it, I'll bet!"

And as the *mazourke* was now playing, he encircled Maude's waist, and whirled her away to its dulcet measures.

Absorbed in each other, neither of these observed a Mexican masker who was pressing his way toward Maude at the same time with Charley Osborne.

With the American's usual contempt for the "Greaser," Charley had shouldered him aside, and so taken possession of Maude almost out of his very hand.

Maude had never given a second thought to the lover of the girl in whose gay plumage she was now disporting herself; yet this was none other than Sancho, robbed, as he supposed, of his sweetheart.

That the jaunty little Perside should attract the American, did not surprise or disturb him; but the evident complacency with which the girl who had sworn that he and he alone was treasured in the core of her heart received the attentions of this hated stranger, drove poor Sancho beside himself with amazement and rage.

"Ah! little liar! cheat! perjurer! Ten thousand devils!"

Only a hoarse rasping sound, like a death-rattle, escaped him, drowned by the hubbub of scuffling feet, merry laughter, gay badinage, that rose all about. But these fierce words of denunciation roared and thundered through his brain.

He drew back as if stung. His hand plunged under his *serape* in quest of his dagger hilt, and he gathered himself together as if about to spring upon the pair and glut his revenge with two sure blows.

But a Greaser must be very blind with rage before he quite loses a wholesome respect for American prowess.

With a rasping Spanish oath, the deluded Sancho glared through the eye-holes of his mask after the gliding figure of what he supposed to be his faithless sweetheart.

Never had her lissom grace so charmed him. But that is not surprising, since never before had he watched her floating like a sylph in another man's arms.

But the discovery of each new fascination only provoked a ravenous longing to blot it out forever!

That mazourke, so delightful to four favored mortals, so full of all the furies of hell to poor Sancho, at last came to an end. To Tom and Francisca it had seemed only a long-drawn lover's sigh; to tortured Sancho, an age of suffocating madness!

Francisca, as we know, was led to her fate in that darkened nook at the vine-draped end of the piazza.

Maude, who had not lost her curiosity about this pair in the interest of her game at cross-

purposes with her recreant lover, led Charley after them by a trick which quite blinded him to her purpose, and at the same time prepared another snare for his unwary feet, by flattering his vanity with the belief that he had added another amatory scalp to the many that hung at his belt; for Charley was by no means in disfavor with the ladies!

Looking about and pretending to discover some one whom she wished to avoid, she uttered a low ejaculation of alarm, and hurried him toward the door opposite to that by which Tom had made his exit.

Now, as luck would have it, she looked directly at the maddened Sancho, of course without knowing him; and though he could not see her eyes, the direction of her face was sufficient evidence that she had seen him, and fled by the nearest door, in the hope of herself escaping detection.

And she had gone by the front door! Whither with this new lover? Out into the street! away from the fandango!

Blind with suspicious jealousy, he set out in hot pursuit. But the crowded hall was between them; and as he tore his way rudely through the throng, he soon provoked remonstrance, and ere long indignant opposition.

Cries of angry protest arose, and he soon found himself struggling in the restraining grasp of several men whose partners he had unceremoniously jostled.

There were conflicting efforts to carry out both suggestions of the crowd—that he be stopped, and that he be thrown into the street.

Of course Sancho favored the latter purpose, and defeating the demand that he be unmasked by laying about him with a will, and no mean display of skill as well, he was finally hustled through the door with his incognito preserved.

Such little brushes as this were too common to excite any more than passing interest, the crowd being satisfied with having extruded him from their midst and slammed the door.

But the delay was fatal to his purpose. Neither his fickle sweetheart, nor the too-fascinating *Americano*, was to be seen anywhere in the street, though the betrayed lover ran first one way and then the other, fairly foaming at the mouth with blasphemies.

The fact was, that Maude had drawn Charley around the corner of the house—the dauntless Charley Osborne, who had two minds between continuing the flight with this charming little witch, and turning to annihilate the scurvy fellow, whoever he might be, that dared to dog her steps because she had shown the good taste to prefer a gentleman of American blood and breeding to a vermin-harboring Greaser!

Reaching the garden in this way—a garden whose clumps of shrubbery seemed to have been grouped with especial reference to forming lovers' retreats—Maude for some time threaded its mazes in a vain quest, till accident disclosed Tom returning to the piazza with the wine which was destined to lead to such delightful results.

Then Maude, still eluding a phantom pursuer, dragged Charley off to a place close to the end of the piazza where the lovers were so snugly ensconced; and making him understand by signs that he was to wait where she placed him, she crept still nearer, ostensibly to reconnoiter, but really to get within overhearing distance of those upon whom she was spying.

It was all very cleverly done, so that Charley was quite hoodwinked. But he was not satisfied, by any means, with this dodging about to escape a miserable wretch whom, left to himself, he would have mopped the ground with! And, just when the thing was most interesting, so absorbing in fact that Maude was in danger of forgetting the lover whom she had stationed like a wooden Indian before a cigar shop to await her return—when that first exquisite "Tom—dear Tom!" was stabbed through with the poisoned dart of Alverado Saumarez's ominous name—then Charley's pride rose in open revolt, and he moved to the side of his *inamorata* with a mar-plot protest.

His, not Alverado's, was the voice that startled Francisca.

Charley heard her cry of alarm, heard Tom leap to his feet, heard the restraining appeal of agonized love, not a word of which was intelligible to him, till the heart-cry of "Tom—dear Tom!" told him who was on the other side of the screen of vine leaves, and at the same instant awakened a suspicion that the little beauty whom he had supposed infatuated with him had all the while been craftily leading him by the nose, to land him in this most ignominious of positions—a spy upon his friend's love-making! Charley would rather have been convicted of a fairly respectable murder.

Besides this, there was another quite as imperious motive to escape discovery at all hazards.

Oddly enough, he had not seen Tom at the fandango, though of course aware that he was to be present; and now it suddenly burst upon him with overwhelming force that Maude Granville's protector was to be a witness of his disloyalty in the very first hour of his love for her!

But even in this strait, if there was one

thought which, above all others, he did not for an instant entertain, it was the thought of abandoning the pretty coquette who had got him into the scrape. If he had liked her as a supposed conquest, he was charmed with her as an intriguing who had so shrewdly turned the tables on him.

With Charley Osborne, to think was to act, and if any apologies were due, to make them afterward.

Through certain previous experiences he had come to know that garden by daylight and dark. He knew that beside him stood a bench, with its back to a clump of shrubbery, the bulk of which was dimly-distinguishable as a spot of denser blackness in the gloom.

So he sought to combine his needs of escape and continued possession, by catching Maude up in his arms, stepping upon the bench, and treating her to an airy flight over the tops of the bushes!

Alas! what landscape gardener, even with an eye to the exigencies of lovers, could make provision for so unheard-of a proceeding as this?

While in mid-air, a bar of light from the dancing hall struck athwart Charley's broad shoulders, making him a spectacle for gods and men!

He alighted almost on the heads of a couple who were billing and cooing on the other side of the bush; and with the startled scream of the lady and the execrations of her lover blent a burst of laughter and the rallying cry of the friend he had hoped to elude:

"Bravo, Charley! Well done! well done!"

It goes without saying that our discomfited Lothario "made himself scarce!"

CHAPTER IX.

COURTSHIP UNDER SEVERAL DIFFICULTIES.

RESTRAINED from rushing forth to unearth the spy by the clinging arms of his *inamorata*, to whom he yielded, not through fear of the supposed skulker, but because this was her first petition, Tom thrust his hands through the vines, and tore an open space through which he might at least get a chance to mark his enemy.

Francisca, too, stared through the aperture, fully expecting to discover Alverado, or some of his men. But what was her relief when Tom cried:

"Look! look! Why, it is my dearest friend!"

Then followed his burst of laughter and hearty applauding of Charley's remarkable performance.

But a profound sigh from Francisca caused him to turn and throw his arm about her, and he felt that the reaction had left her scarcely able to stand.

He half bore her back to the bench, and sat holding her close-pressed to his heart, which was still reverberating with the echoes of her pathetic "Tom!—dear Tom!"

"And did you love me so?" he asked, his voice vibrant with emotion.

"You can never know!" she breathed. "Ah! how my heart has hungered and thirsted for you—long, long before I dreamed who you might be! Some one it must be who could brave my cousin's rage, and, I fear, *kill* him! All my life his murderous jealousy has overshadowed me like the deadly upas tree, destroying every one who dared to approach me with the solicitations of love, in rivalry with him!"

"And I, ingrate! chafed and cried out like a naughty child, so little dreaming that it was Our Ever Merciful Mother, turning his curses to blessings!—using him, in spite of himself, to preserve me pure and untainted by even the breath of love for you—*you*, my lover! my husband!—you, so brave, so strong! Ah! do I fear your meeting with him? No! no, a thousand times *no*! But it shall not be in the darkness, to fall a victim to his cowardly bravos! Let it be in the broad daylight, when you can guard against his treachery, when foot to foot and eye to eye, the better man can win! Then all dark angels hover round you, and my prayers encompass you like a wall of adamant against his cruel steel!"

"Ah! now that I have you—*you*, out of all the world of men!—could I let him poison my whole life in this first hour?"

Who would have dreamed that the heart of the vestal devotee of the morning could harbor such burning thoughts, that now welled to her lips like long-pent waters!

Tom, intoxicated by her passion, yet awed by the virgin sanctity that invested her every thought and feeling, experienced the upspringing in his heart, of the noblest sentiments of reverent tenderness. How should he ever be worthy of such a woman!

But with that instinct of temperance that enables some women to preserve a perennial charm, by never permitting the keen edge of desire to be turned by satiety, Francisca vouchsafed this excess of self-abandonment for only a moment, and then shyly extricated herself from her lover's embrace, while yet he was loth to let her go.

Once more laughingly "commanding" him to replace her mask, it was at her desire that they returned indoors, to mingle again with the merry revelers.

Meanwhile Charley Osborne had not stopped

to set Maude on her feet till he reached a spot the silence of which seemed a guarantee for a reasonable degree of privacy, though to be sure he had exercised commendable expedition in reaching it.

Here the lady fell to chattering in a very breathless way in Spanish, but with cadences of reproach which did not seem to Charley indicative of any great bitterness of revilement. Indeed, he fancied that she might be slyly laughing in her sleeve.

And this was true. Maude was more and more delighted with him. Here was a lover after her own heart! He did not pull a long face at this game of life which she found so deliciously amusing. He had the wit and boldness which promised his rising to any emergency. If there was one manner of man which she detested before all others, it was a puling sentimentalist, as she put it, who, boggling over some nice scruple, permitted himself to "get left!"

Of course it was a part of the game that she should be greatly scandalized by the unpardonable liberties he had taken. Equally of course it was indispensable that he should maintain his part of the farce by pretending to believe her in earnest.

Charley proceeded to acquit himself in a way that defied criticism, by casting himself on his knees at her feet, in an attitude of the most abject deprecation.

There was a slight discrepancy between his words and the accents of profound abasement in which they were uttered; but of course with an auditor who did not understand English that would not count.

"Splutter away, you delightful little humbug! You don't mean a word of that—you know you don't!"

Then holding up his hands in a most melodramatic gesture, the gloom permitting the general outlines of his figure to be distinguished while it hid the expression of his face, he threw the justification of his rashness into the one Spanish word at his command, thrice repeated, to signalize his helplessness through the barrier of speech, and so to bespeak her greater leniency:

"Honor! honor! honor!"

Then back to English:

"That ought to go down, the more readily since you have already forgiven me before I asked!"

"It has gone down," answered Maude, in Spanish, "in my account against you! Was there ever so deliciously conceited a fellow since the world began? I shall never be able to hold resentment against him!"

Of course all this was lost on Charley, save only the tone of relenting softness. But this was enough for our bold lover. He at once seized her hands, and fell to kissing them rapturously.

"Ah, *senorita*!" he cried, now perfectly at home with his Spanish, "*you are an angel! But you break my heart with your pitying forgiveness! How can I make reparation for my fault?*"

All this, we say, Charley was able to render in Spanish that was at least intelligible. And well he might be. For had not his intercourse with the daughters of Iberia consisted almost wholly of protestations of devotion, and of pleas for forgiveness for similar offenses?

He at once, without waiting for Maude to impose conditions, proceeded to make such reparation as he thought would be most acceptable to both.

This consisted in drawing her to a seat, while he promptly sought the removal of her mask.

Of course the lady struggled against this, and appealed to his generosity, in consideration of his masculine strength, carefully modulating her voice so that it could not be heard ten steps away!

"Oh, *senor*! *senor*! *senor*!"

But as often as she said *senor*, he echoed "*querida*!" (my darling). And it ended, as such contests usually do, in his having his will.

"And this," said Maude, in the tone of those tender reproaches which are no barrier to love, "is the last proof of the perfidy of man! I can never trust him out of my sight! But he's a darling lover! I shall never be able to remember his infidelities, with his sweet perjuries ringing in my ears!"

And he murmured into her ear, in accents of deathless devotion:

"Was there ever such a double-dyed villain, such a black-hearted varlet, as I? A traitor to my one true love, after having made her ill by that dastardly trick! How could I persist in it, with her trusting eyes raised to mine? Friendship be hanged! Anybody but a coward would have thrown Tom over even at the last moment, and spared her. Confound him!—I'll never forgive him, never! But I'll make it up to her, if it is possible for such an innocent little thing to be taken in by such an infamous blackguard as I am! I'll reform, I swear I will—after to-night! She shall never have cause for a pang of jealousy, if I have to wear smoked-glass goggles whenever I am out of her sight, so that all pretty girls shall look to me the color of gingerbread! But these velvety lips—ah! they will

haunt me to my dying day! God help me! I'm afraid that's only too true!"

"And do you think," whispered Maude, while keeping him at bay by holding to the two ends of his mustache, "that I am going to let this run till I make myself my rival for life, through a ghostly recollection of my own sweetness? Never! never! never!"

At last, giving vent in a ringing laugh to the devils of merriment that were torturing her beyond endurance, she sprung away from him, and fled toward the dancing-hall, readjusting her mask as she ran.

Charley followed in a somewhat mixed state of feeling. To be sure, he had secured love's trophies; but she seemed to be laughing at him, as if the whole thing were a farce to which he, not she, had been the dupe.

"Confound the little flirt!" he cried aloud, of course knowing no reason for reserve in the expression of his thoughts, so long as they were couched in a language unintelligible to the subject of them. "Now she will return to her blackamoor of a Greaser with renewed fervor; and he will be the one of us two who will not be entirely fooled by her! She has condescended to while the time with me in his absence!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" chuckled Maude, delighted beyond expression. "I have killed my ghostly rival with a single stab. Now you will never recall those luscious lips without the disgusting association of their eager competition with some Greaser's *cigarretos*!"

She took his arm demurely enough as she permitted him to come up with her at the edge of the piazza; and neither of them observed a dusky figure that stopped suddenly in its hurried advance, as the light from the dancing-room revealed Maude's costume, to slink deeper into the shadows, and then follow them into the house.

But this proved to be the same man who not long before had fought his way to the front door in pursuit of them. He had several fellows at his back, and after a muttered word from him, they one by one lounged into the room, all of them being masked like their leader.

A cotillion chanced to be forming at the moment when Maude and Charley entered, and an impulse of mischievous bravado, with a spice of pique at Tom's preference of a Mexican belle before her, impelled Maude to secure for herself and Charley the place of *vis-a-vis* to Tom and Francisca!

She ran the risk, which, however, she did not believe great, of having her identity discovered by Tom, in exchange for the fun of putting Charley in an embarrassing position, and for the opportunity to show Tom at least one flaw in his paragon, by surpassing her in dancing.

Charley did look a little shamefaced as he met Tom's twinkling eye; but then, with a quick resumption of his wonted nonchalance, he laughed:

"Score your point, old man! It will be my turn next! And, you may count on it, I'll mete back to you the measure of mercy you now dole to me!"

"Only remember that you are in my power, and try to deserve my forbearance!" laughed Tom, in reply. "But if I continue to give you a show, don't think it is under menace. I defy you to catch me tripping!"

"So this," cried Maude, "is the way these lordly fellows trade us off among them! Luckily, we will get even with them in our own way!"

"In the present case, for instance, we shall beat quits, if I can show one of them that, in trading me for this little black and tan, he has been done—done brown!"

In spite of which slighting allusion, Maude was far from really underrating the exquisite loveliness of her rival's blue-black and rich olive complexion, kissed into bloom in the cheeks by familiar mountain winds.

By what subtle instinct did Francisca detect the challenge which Maude threw down for her acceptance? Perhaps it was only that she was quick to perceive that, under the eye of the man in whose admiration she longed to stand in everything without a peer, she was brought into direct competition with a rival of no mean pretensions.

Who could it be? Francisca knew herself so easily first among all the belles of San Hernandez, it seemed impossible that any one of them could have blossomed in a single night into this full flower of finished grace.

With quick apprehension she looked into Tom's face, and saw that his eye had been attracted by Maude's symmetry of form and harmony of movements, as revealed by the exquisitely coquettish costume into which poor Perside had stitched her brightest hopes, with many a gay laugh and snatch of happy song; with now a blush and now a sigh; and after all, those bitter tears of disappointment.

Not the worshipful tenderness with which his eyes sought hers, but still appreciation, she saw in Tom's following glance, as her rival gyrated in an airy pirouette, or flexed her supple figure in some pose of sinuous grace.

As if this were not enough, he took advantage of a pause to remark:

"You Mexicans are born for the hammock

and the ball-room. My countrywomen might well barter half their other arts for your secret."

He could see in another what he admired in her! She shared her charms with a whole nation! He loved—a Mexican!

For a moment her heart sunk within her, with a sickening sense of dread. Then her spirit rose defiant, to fight for undisputed empire in her lover's heart.

Into this contest both women now threw their whole hearts, one actuated by piqued vanity, the other defending her menaced Eden.

It was not long before the attention of those in their vicinity was attracted, and as the interest spread like fire in the prairie grass, curious spectators came crowding round.

It was whispered that, since there could not be in San Hernandez three equal to such feats of graceful evolution, Francisca Monteiro da Rocha must needs be one of these; but, if one, which? and that decided, who was the other?

Such a suspicion as this was not long in breaking up all the other sets in the room, till this one held the floor alone.

Then some one shouted to the orchestra. The cry was taken up and swelled into an imperious demand.

The music stopped in the midst of a bar, and began again to a different movement, eliciting a general clapping of hands in approval.

Francisca shrunk timidly toward Tom at the prospect of the ordeal which she saw was now to be forced upon her, and but for her mask it would have been seen that her face flamed scarlet, while her eyes were piteous with distress.

CHAPTER X.

THE ORDEAL.

If Tom could have seen Francisca as she was, who can say whether his love would have thrown a protecting arm about her before them all, and stopped the thing then and there, resolving that she should not suffer a pang to win the applause of all the world; or his pride would have urged her to the contest, confident in her triumph, and scorning a weakness that would yield a pre-eminence rightfully hers?

Maude knew no hesitancy. She saw Tom's anxiety and Francisca's shrinking, and resolving to crowd her to the wall, stepped boldly out into the open space.

"I'll prove to him that he has gone further, and fared worse!"

Instantly Charley Osborne was seized with the dominant spirit of the West, and swinging his hat above his head, he shouted to Tom:

"A double-X on the darlings! Put up, or shut up!"

But then his innate sense of delicacy told him that his relation to his lady was not quite the same as Tom's to his, and that a man who loved a woman as his prospective wife would probably not feel like backing her as he would a favorite horse.

"Hold on, pard!" he amended. "Of course that won't do. I was a mite previous, for a fact. But it's a fair shake, all the same. If we beat you, we'll crow!"

"Do your crowing now!" advised Tom, in a low, tense voice, as if to suggest that the occasion for it would not improve with delay.

And he bent upon Francisca a smile of quiet confidence that told her that in all the wide world there was but one dancer for him.

After a single lightning glance up into his face, she dared not look at him. Oh, if she should disappoint his faith!

Maude executed a fancy dance of great brilliancy, and was heartily applauded on every side, some declaring at once that she could be none other than the old Don's daughter, who had jumped the bounds with which, as every gossip knew, her freedom was hampered.

Sancho gnawed his mustache, between pride at the success which he believed his recreant little sweetheart had scored, and rage at her persistent ignoring of his rights. He should now be at her side; not that accursed American! For what had she secretly given him a clew to her disguise? To thus shamelessly parade her conquest before him? Yet, in spite of everything, he loved her more savagely than ever!

But his rival? With every breath he cursed him with the most direful maledictions, particularizing in detail every member and organ of his body; his ancestors, his posterity, and all who bore any relation to him in life: the time and place of his birth, and— His death he took upon himself. He would delay it till he had thought up that mode which would most nearly sate a revenge as boundless as the universe! *Maldito!*

Quite oblivious to the storm that was gathering about his devoted head, light-hearted Charley Osborne seized both of Maude's hands as she returned to him, and shaking them in hearty congratulation, shouted:

"Well done, little woman! You can always count on me, let the world wag as it will!"

And to the crowd, swinging his hat to stimulate their ardor:

"Cheer, you beggars!—cheer!"

They did cheer; but when Francisca had executed a dance in the same spirit, there were many who declared loudly and long for her.

The house seemed fairly divided, and the chance of an agreement remote.

The Babel of a bootless discussion of the various points of excellence finally resolved itself into a new demand on the orchestra.

A new strain of most languid sliding cadences, the dancing to which consisted chiefly in attitudinizing with serpent-like sinuosity of swaying body and wreathing arms, gave the dancers an opportunity to display nature's masterpiece in its most seductive aspects.

But in this each acquitted herself so well, that the result was only wilder enthusiasm and more fiercely partizan discussion.

Then Maude resolved to crush her rival at a blow. She herself sent word to the musicians what she desired, and in the performance that followed every art of the *danseuse* seemed carried to its height and rendered in its ideal perfection.

She was greeted with one round of applause from beginning to end, and when she finished with a grand *coup*, it seemed as if every Greaser in the room longed to throw himself at her feet in attestation of his wild delight.

Charley Osborne did not pretend to be any judge of dancing; but he read victory in the temper of the crowd, in the frantic eagerness with which those who had heretofore espoused Francisca's cause were besieged by all the others with an insane desire to stake all their worldly possessions, if not their hopes of a future, at any sort of odds, on this last effort.

Conspicuous among these was Sancho. He had quite lost his head. So wildly elated was he with the performance of his supposed sweetheart, that he forgave her everything. He only longed—or for the moment thought he did—to swoon in her arms, and die.

As for Charley, he took the contagion, and casting his hat on the floor, fell to dancing the tallest kind of a war-dance on it, at the end of which he seized Maude, and swung her round and round in a mad whirl for which he would have got small thanks, but that he already held her heart, and this was the expression of his delight in her.

"Go to your Greaser!" he shouted to her, plaintively; "but, you little dev—dancing dervish! you take the heart out of my body along with you!"

And Francisca? She had watched every movement with an eye that knew its value; she conceded the justice of the wild enthusiasm of her judges; she knew that she was overwhelmed, unless she retrieved her fortunes by an achievement which should eclipse even the greatest of her past successes. But she knew, too, that if she could turn the tide now setting against her, her rival could do no more.

There was but one, if any hope; and from an inseparable incident of that alternative she shrunk quailing, afraid!

At that, every line of Maude Granville's body proclaimed her scornful triumph, so that it almost seemed as if her very mask changed its expression.

Then Tom, his heart aching for what he believed to be the humiliation of his *inamorata*, and bitter with self-reproach that he had permitted her to be drawn into this useless contest, threw his arm about her before them all, and holding her close, he murmured into her ear:

"Enough! enough, my darling! You have done bravely! And I shall love you just the same!"

Nothing could be more tenderly consoling; yet his words burnt her like fire.

Just the same? just the same? With all the pride gone out of his eyes!—that pride which gives brilliancy to the glance of love!—that pride which makes glad ownership! He would love her just the same—with comforting pity!

How she started from his arms! With what a queen-like lift of the head she looked about upon the crowd, till, selecting one whose voice she thought she recognized, she walked across to him, and spoke something into his ear.

The man started and stared at her; she made an imperious gesture; and he at once turned to force his way through the crowd toward the orchestra.

Then she stood, not with muscles tense with defiant pride, but in the graceful relaxation of serene equipoise.

Tom's face showed that he longed to catch her to his heart with rapturous kisses!

Nothing else could have so piqued expectation. The crowd knew that, whatever the momentary weakness, it was not the abasement of conscious defeat. And now it was put aside, and this young queen was about to claim her laurels right royally!

The hubbub of Maude's triumph suddenly died away, and all craned their necks to seize the coming event.

The moment the orchestra struck up, some one shouted:

"Francisca!"

The girl quivered from head to foot, as if with an electric shock; yet stood firm.

Something between a sigh and a murmur of recognition swept over the assemblage like a gust of wind through a grove.

Then she began to dance!

The music was a medley of varied expression,

now gay with the sunny gladness of a spring morning, now sad with the brooding melancholy of a summer night; now mincing with playful coquetry, now grand and strong and ringing with triumphal resonance; now swooning with voluptuous languor, now wild with the abandon of ecstatic frenzy!

And the dancing that followed it like an echo, it is impossible to describe!

Never bayadere on the holy Ganges, never sultana in the Bagdad of the golden reign of Haroun-al-Raschid, never bacchante in the sacred groves of the fabled gods of Greece, so gladdened the eye!

The room resounded with one incessant shout: "Francisca! Francisca! Francisca!"

The girl sunk sobbing into her lover's arms!

No further need now for disguise of any sort, either of her person or of her heart! For love of him she had betrayed her identity! She had triumphed; but to do it, she had executed a dance which every one recognized as her own, so like, yet so unlike any previous rendition. On the morrow all her world would know that the daughter of proud old Don Jose Monteiro da Rocha had stolen out of her home to meet a lover at a fandango, like any scullery maid!

To keep the proud light in his eye, she had braved the fiery wrath of her father's reproofing glance, the glare of vindictive jealousy in Alverado Saumarez's!

There was a savage surge in the crowd, different from any that could result from their maddest enthusiasm—such as could be caused only by the determined shouldering of a powerful man; and a woman sprung from their midst as if shot forth by the propulsive force behind her, and threw her arms about Francisca.

It was Chiquita's voice, yet scarcely recognizable in its hoarse terror, that breathed into her ear the ominous name:

"Alverado! Alverado!"

With the thought that she would first receive his dagger in her own body, and so give her lover a chance to escape the treacherous blow of the assassin, Francisca turned, to have her mask torn from her face by a hand of iron!

Amid cries of alarm on every side, Alverado Saumarez stood before her, his livid lips quivering with rage, his eyes gleaming with murderous hate!

But the vigilant eye of love was guardian over her.

As the crowd surged toward them, Tom thought only to protect her from being rudely jostled. Then as Chiquita sprung forth to warn her mistress, and, gazing backward over her shoulder with apprehension, sunk to her knees with a cry of terror, as if to avoid a blow, Tom turned his head in time to see and recognize Alverado in the act of thrusting forth his hand as he strode up.

Divining his purpose, and seeing that it was too late to frustrate it, while he knew Francisca's anxiety above all things to preserve her incognito, he shielded her from exposure in the only way possible, by dexterously enveloping her head in her *robosa* at the very instant in which her mask was snatched away, so that neither her ruffianly assailant nor any one else caught even so much as a glimpse of her agonized face.

This with his left hand, while as a part of the same motion his stanch right shot straight from the shoulder over her head, taking the Mexican squarely between the eyes, and stretching him on his back as if stricken by a thunderbolt!

From the lips of the male spectators of this lightning-like retort burst a concerted yell of dismay, which the women edged with their shrill screams of terror. Then came a blind rush to escape by flight, every one taking it for granted that within a moment the spot would be desolated by a hail of bullets from the weapons of Saumarez's backers.

They were there, and sprung promptly to the aid of their fallen chief.

With a protecting arm about Francisca, at whose feet yet knelt the faithful Chiquita, hiding her face in her mistress's skirts to shut out of sight the death she believed was upon her, Tom planted a in nowise gentle foot upon the breast of his discomfited enemy, and stood at bay with drawn revolver.

"Back to back, pard, to the death!" shouted Charley Osborne.

And swinging Maude in between his own body and those of his friends, he faced the other way, prepared for all comers.

And there were enough of them on every side, if he could but have distinguished them by the eyes gleaming through their masks!

CHAPTER XI.

"ALL CATS ARE GRAY IN THE DARK."

EVEN in that supreme moment Maude's heart swelled with admiration at the gallant pose unconsciously struck by her lover.

"He's a darling, at fighting, as at love-making!"

But she had only a moment to observe him in. Some one shouted:

"The lights! the lights!"

And as all were alike in terror of promiscuous

shooting, and the opinion prevailed that the combatants were less likely to open fire if they could not see the targets for their bullets, it was surprising how soon the room was left in total darkness.

Then came a rude jostling in which no one could distinguish his neighbor.

"We don't want to be the last in this room, waiting for that villain's bravos!" cried Charley. "Follow me, if you can, Tom! I know this old rat-hole like a book! Hang to my coat!"

And instead of making his way toward the door which gave upon the street, he plunged into the surging mass toward that which opened into the garden.

Supporting Francisca as Charley did Maude, Tom followed his suggestion by seizing hold of his collar with one hand.

The object of this was to keep together without constantly proclaiming their identity to their enemies by the sound of Charley's voice.

As it was, Osborne got a knife-thrust in his arm as they burst through the line of Alverado's bravos.

To disable the ruffian for another stroke at him or Tom, Charley by a lightning-like snatch seized the wrist of his assailant, and with a skillful twist dislocated his shoulder.

But to do this required a momentary removal of the arm that surrounded Maude; and taking advantage of this release, the girl executed a scheme for the means to carry which into effect she had been casting about, ever since it became apparent that her escape from that room in the company of Charley Osborne, would probably end in the detection of her identity by the last man on earth she would be willing should know it.

Presenting her shoulder, she made a quick backward plunge, so as to dive between Tom and Francisca, breaking his hold by the unexpectedness of this assault. At the same time she seized Francisca about the waist, and whirled her forward to the place she herself had just occupied; and catching Tom's arm with one hand, while she snatched off her own mask with the other as soon as it left Francisca's waist, she drew his arm about her neck so that his hand pressed her cheek.

The exchange was effected like lightning! Tom, feeling the bare cheek, thought that this calling attention to the absence of her mask was a means adopted by Francisca to silently assure him of her identity. Charley, finding Francisca exactly where he had reason to expect Maude, had of course no way of detecting the imposition. Francisca, supposing that some one had merely burst between her and Tom, leaving them in the same relative position, and being immediately appropriated by Charley, was too greatly stunned and bewildered by the whole proceeding to notice the discrepancy.

A moment later they were struggling in the narrow doorway with the frantic mass seeking exit; and here, finding both hands necessary for the protection of his companion, Tom lost his hold on his guide.

When they got out, they were hopelessly separated; and Tom had to reconcile himself to the loss of the advantage of Charley's knowledge of the locality, and strike out on his own account.

Chiquita had long since found herself alone, tossed about like a chip on a stormy sea.

The hour was so late that the lights of the town were out, and the people racing along the darkened streets could only make out each other's general outlines.

Charley, as has been said, was about the size and general build of his friend Tom, so that Francisca, even in ordinary circumstances, might well have been deceived. As it was, with her mind in a whirl with thoughts of the peril that hung over her lover, and which the fierce assault had made stand out as a vivid and terrible reality such as she had never before conceived, the sound of his voice alone could have apprised her of her mistake.

But the sound of his voice was that which of all things he must guard most jealously.

More than once he thought that he heard those following whom he could not see. They might be fugitives, as little grateful for his company as he for theirs; they might be skulking bravos, waiting for a chance to strike, and strike home!

On the other hand, there was too little difference in the personal appearance of Francisca and Maude for him to be likely to notice it, his suspicions not being otherwise aroused.

Charley had not the slightest idea who the little beauty with whom he had been coquetting was; and he was not too scrupulous to take advantage of her agitation to find out.

As soon as they were outside of the garden, he let her take the further direction of their course, trusting to her to lead him to her home.

Of course Francisca had no reason for wishing to hide her home from her lover, even if it had not already been known to him; so she led her escort directly to the *casa*.

"Well, I swear!" cried Charley to himself. "If I haven't got the little maid that favored Tom with an assignation at the very altar! That accounts for the racket I've had! I might have guessed that there couldn't be two such

solid little bricks in this one-horse town. But, maid or no maid, she's a princess in disguise!"

Fearing to take the main road on which she had first met her lover, Francisca had directed their course along sundry by-paths, so that they approached the *casa* at the back.

As they entered a chaparral which surrounded the house, she stopped and threw herself into her supposed lover's arms, too much overcome with emotion for speech.

At this sort of thing, it goes without saying, she could have found no one less backward than Charley Osborne.

He gave as good as he got, and whatever becomes of current theories about the grand passion, a faithful chronicler can but record that the result was quite as satisfactory to both as if the one complementary soul predestined through the eternities had not been replaced by an alien!

"My darling!" he murmured, rapturously.

And she sighed tremulously:

"Ah! what peril have I brought about you! And I have held it so light till now! He will stop at nothing to kill you, my lover! Oh, be watchful—be prudent!"

Of course Charley understood nothing of this save the passion of tenderness with which she clasped him to her throbbing bosom, and the lingering pressure of her tear-wet lips.

This was very different from Maude's flippant coquetry, but he ascribed the change to the scene through which she had passed.

"It has taken all the snap out of her," he said to himself. "But what am I to do with the rest of it? She is seriously in love with me, after all. No woman ever kissed a man like this who wasn't."

One way of looking at it, there was nothing in this to greatly disturb such a happy-go-lucky fellow as Charley Osborne. He did not suppose that he had made such a deep impression in the course of an evening on a chance pick-up. The girl had probably seen him about the town, and had cherished a secret passion for him nobody could tell how long, till the accident of his fixing upon her as his partner, and their subsequent association, had developed it, and so brought her to this self-revelment.

Now the fact was, with all his laxity in love matters, a real passion had its effect on Charley, and Maude had impressed him so that, for the first time in his life, he felt a strong repugnance to giving the lady of his preference a serious rival.

Heretofore his motto had been, *the more the merrier*. Now he resolved to break off his relations with his pretty masker at once, and finally.

"Let me see you into the house," he said, kindly, yet far from the way which might be expected in an impassioned lover.

Francisca was chilled by his giving her up so readily, but she attributed it to his anxiety for her safety, while the thought of having him see the means by which she had escaped from her chamber to go to him, filled her with such an overwhelming sense of shame that she did not stop to analyze his moods very carefully.

"Oh, no!" she cried, shrinking from him.

And then, to repair what she supposed was the wound inflicted by her abruptness and seeming want of confidence, she drew near again, and whispered softly in English, to make her words the sweeter to him:

"Let us part here, my lover!"

"Good heaven!" cried Charley to himself. "The witch understands English! She speaks it as well as I do!"

He was so stupefied by all the consequences attendant upon this fact, that he offered little, if any restraint as she slipped from his embrace, and ran away like a shadow.

"Well," he declared, "that was a Parthian arrow! She speaks English. She understood every word I uttered. But is she laughing at me, or does she love me in spite of it all? That last wasn't the kiss of a woman who is making game of one, and nothing more. I am a black-hearted scoundrel to win the love of a woman like that, when I'm dead gone on another! Whether she returns the compliment or not, the little Granville is the first woman that ever made me feel like throwing off on another; so the little Granville holds the first mortgage bonds on my sadly watered stock of affection!"

For some moments he stood reflecting on his amatory shortcomings, and then turned away with a sigh; but before he reached the border of the chaparral, he was startled by the snapping of a twig, and almost instantly received a stunning blow on the head.

Dizzily he saw a lot of men start up all about him, and it flashed upon him that he was mistaken for Tom Templeton, and these were Alverado Saumarez's men!

From them he had nothing to expect but death!

The use of the revolver, when life hangs upon the magic of the "drop," becomes automatic; and almost as quickly as he could have thrown up his hand, Charley Osborne's leaped into line.

He fired, but in the same instant was grappled, and found himself struggling with as many stout fellows as could well seize hold of him.

Now there were few better all-round athletes

than Charley Osborne; and for the space of half a minute he gave his assailants the liveliest kind of a tussle.

He had shaken himself free and sent more than one of them sprawling, and began to hope that he might yet escape them, when he received another blow on the head which brought him to his knees, when they all piled upon him once more, like hounds dragging a stag to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

A PLUCKY LITTLE MAID.

MEANWHILE Francisca had fled toward the house, her heart a prey to the wildest conflict of hope and fear.

As she approached her chamber window, she nearly screamed with fright at the appearance of a dusky figure which sprung out of the shadows upon her.

But it was Chiquita's voice that whispered:

"Ah, Francisca, Francisca! The saints be praised, you are restored to me! A thousand deaths have I died since that terrible moment! I thought never to look upon you again in life; and now you are here, safe and well! Oh, Francisca! Francisca, my dear one! Core of my heart, this—this—"

But the words died in sobs, and her voice was smothered in kisses, as the faithful little maid clasped her mistress in her arms.

"Ah, Chiquita!" sobbed Francisca, "this is retribution for the sacrilege of the morning—in the holy church! at the very altar! Oh, oh!"

"Retribution!" scoffed the little maid. "Retribution, that he is now yours forever! Ah! was he not grand! I am a miserable little eaves-dropper; but I heard it all! But we must get in. Here is the ladder all right. Go you up first. That griffin will never know. Be at peace—we shall outwit them yet."

But here came an ominous sound. With her hand on the ladder, Francisca stopped to listen.

A ringing pistol-shot came from the part of the chaparral where she had left her supposed lover, instantly followed by the sounds of a terrific struggle.

"Ah, they have fallen upon him!" cried Francisca, aloud. "They will kill him! I shall never see him again! No! no! it shall not be! Tom! Tom!—dear Tom!"

And she sprung away, to rush to his side.

But the little maid was as active as a panther. In a twinkling she leaped after her mistress, flung her arms about her, and fairly dragged her to the ground, appealing in a hoarsely-guarded voice:

"In the name of the Blessed Virgin! would you ruin all?"

"All!" cried Francisca, still wildly. "If he is dead, what is left? Let me go! I can at least die with him! My lover! my husband!"

"Listen! listen!" sobbed the little maid. "They have not killed him! They dare not murder him outright! They are struggling to capture him! You cannot aid him. If you go now, and acknowledge all, they will not spare him. Remember, Alverado did not see your face. He can never be sure, unless you yourself admit it. Go now, and you condemn him to death! But stay—fly to your chamber, and deceive them all: and if the worst comes, I will swear that it was I—only I! What can they do to me? Shut me up!—starve me a little, maybe! That wretch, Benita, is equal to it! But, what will it matter? Nothing! You will be saved. Your father will release him when he finds there is no proof! Oh, Francisca! listen! be advised by me! Come, come! I will save you!"

By this time the sounds of the struggle were over, and only the men could be heard swearing in a way which showed that they had not come off scathless.

Francisca lay in the arms of her faithful attendant almost swooning. She would have remained wrapped in that deathly apathy, only faintly moaning, till they came and found her, but for the persistent rallying of the little maid.

"Come, oh, come!" urged Chiquita. "They will be looking for you in a moment. That they delay is proof that, at worst, they have captured him alive, and so do not mean to kill him. It is even possible that he has escaped. But the house will be aroused in a moment; and then all will be lost. Come, dear Francisca! Oh, will you yourself condemn him to death by your delay?"

Nothing less than this would have roused the sinking girl. She started up wildly.

"I?—I?" she cried. "I slay him?—the light of my life! Oh, let us get in!"

Now she ran, staggering blindly with excitement, and clinging to the faithful Chiquita as to her life stay.

"All the blessed saints be praised!" murmured the little maid devoutly, as she guided the erratic steps of her mistress in the right way.

As they reached the ladder which yet hung against the wall, a light gleamed from a window above and to the right of where they stood, out of which the Don thrust his head and began to shout to his servants in the stables, demanding the cause of the disturbance.

Chiquita hugged her mistress close against the wall, within the shelter of some vine leaves, breathing within her inmost heart:

"We are lost! we are lost! Pepe, with all his fellows at his back, will be upon us before we dare stir to ascend."

"It is of no use!" declared Francisca. "I will call to my father, tell him all, and demand his interdict of any blow against the life—"

"And do you dream," panted Chiquita, "that if he knew the truth he would stay the blow? Rather would he command it! And if he did, who would hesitate?—who would betray him afterward?"

Francisca shuddered.

"Lost! lost! lost!" she moaned. "Oh, my brave hero! He the victim of assassins!"

Answering cries came from the stables. Pepe was aroused. His men sprung up at his command.

The Don directed them to the point where the struggle had taken place, and then popped his head in at his window to prepare to come down and investigate for himself.

"Now! now!" cried Chiquita, almost lifting her mistress upon the first rung of the ladder. "If you are quick, we shall outwit them under their very noses. Up! up! and all good angels speed you!"

With this incitement, Francisca scrambled up the ladder, how, she never knew.

Chiquita followed with the agility of a cat.

In at the window! Then up came the ladder in a style that no sailor could have improved upon. But she turned, only to find her mistress lying on the floor in a dead faint.

Here was a misfortune which would have driven most people to their wits' end.

For a moment even, the little maid stood with her hands pressed to her heart.

"It is Heaven that has turned against us!" she sighed. "If it were I alone, I should know that it was for my incorrigible naughtiness. But she, poor soul! She has done nothing in all her sweet life, but love—the Holy Mother first and always, and now this brave and handsome American! But is that wicked? Is she destined to be an old maid, like Benita?"

But with all her devotion—and there was a great deal of it, such as it was—the little maid had a very practical vein in her composition. Without putting it into words, all her sprightly life showed that she was guided by the motto: "Never say die!"

"Let them all turn against her!" she cried, suddenly recovering her animation. "She has Chiquita to the last!"

And snatching a villainous little stiletto, which she wore as a bodkin in her hair, she first cut the lacings of Francisca's bodice; and then springing to a vase of porous earthenware, in which some water was cooling by evaporation, she dashed its contents over the fainting girl, with as little regard for her gay ball dress as for the floor, or for anything else that might chance to suffer from the deluge.

As the cold water splashed in her face, and over her bared bosom, Francisca gasped and shivered.

But this was not enough. Chiquita was not yet done. At her *châtelaine* dangled a little cruse of ammoniated salts. Applying this to Francisca's nostrils, she soon had her shrinking and protesting with inarticulate murmurs.

Without stopping for a complete revival, she began to strip off her mistress's clothes, with a ruthless disregard for everything save expedition.

Skirts were torn from girdle to hem; the silken lacings of the daintiest little shoes that ever graced the twinkling feet of a *danseuse*, were cut with the stiletto; and every other impediment met with like summary disposal; till, long before she was able to so much as lift her head from the floor, Francisca lay entirely free from incumbrance.

With almost as great recklessness, and, if not quite so great, only because speed did not require it, Chiquita proceeded to disrobe herself.

By this time, on being lifted, Francisca could sit up, and even retain her balance on her feet, with the sustaining arm of her faithful little maid about her.

In less time than ever before in her life, she was invested with a night robe, and almost carried bodily and placed in bed, where she lay gasping and moaning faintly.

Then all their gay trappings were gathered in an indiscriminate wad, and bundled into the nearest drawer—any friendly receptacle that would receive them and keep them out of sight for the moment.

By this time a knocking was heard on the door of Francisca's boudoir, in which Benita had been left asleep, and where she was yet snoring lustily.

"Here, take this!" whispered Chiquita, thrusting her vinaigrette into Francisca's trembling hand. "Hide it under your pillow when they come! Keep your courage up—nothing can be proved. Ah, the poor dear! you are the most miserable creature in the world! In your place, I should be the happiest!"

And with a quick kiss, not of pity, but of congratulation, the little maid ran into her own room adjoining, and plumped into bed, jouncing up and down, and pounding her pillows, to make

as deep a depression as she thought would follow two or three hours' occupancy.

Meanwhile the drugged Benita, oblivious to the summons of her master, snored away with unbroken rhythm.

"Ah, the pig!" cried Chiquita, made no more indulgent by the knowledge that she herself was to blame for the duenna's stupidity. "Why cannot she awake, now that every one wishes it? She will spoil all!"

But if she did, it would not be for lack of effort on Miss Chiquita's part.

Out of bed she bounced, and ran back into Francisca's room.

"The beast!" she cried. "Did you ever hear the like? They might pound the house down without my help. But they shall have it with a vengeance! There is a vial of pure ammonia—Ah, here it is! Now I will burn her mustaches off, but she shall open the door!"

And seizing the bottle from a cabinet, she ran into the *boudoir*, and held its mouth directly under the sleeping duenna's nose.

Under this heroic treatment Benita began to cough and splutter and paw at her nose and eyes, while she growled Mexican oaths of great variety and forcefulness.

Chiquita gave her a vigorous push, which started her out of her chair, and very nearly toppled her over on the floor as well; then, while impatient rattling of the door was added to the knocking, glided back into Francisca's room, replaced the ammonia in the cabinet, took therefrom a small flask of spirits, and jumped into the bed along with her mistress.

"Drink a swallow of this—two or three of them!" she urged, forcing the flask into Francisca's hand; "and then under the pillow with it! Ah! those white cheeks and bloodless lips, those agonized eyes, this shivering and cowering little frame!—they will betray us! What shall I do to give you heart again?"

"Think of him! Ah! that is our salvation! Think of when he first held you in his arms! Think of that celestial mass, when your saintly face was drawing his soul through his eyes—poor fellow! Think of his first touch on your arm, at the fandango! Think of the ecstatic thrill of the first pressure of his lips to yours! Think of the moment when he stood with his arm about you, and his foot on Alverado's breast! Think of when you shall stand together at the altar, and plight your vows forever and ever, you two! Think—But this is enough! Ah! my dear one, you were never so beautiful!"

And delighted with the effect of her words—for Francisca had arisen to a sitting posture, her eyes kindling, the color sweeping up into her cheeks, and her body infused with new strength—the little maid threw her arms about her mistress's neck with rapturous kisses.

"You—you must have courage for both of us! But I—miserable little coward!—under the bed-clothes with my head, for fear of the robbers!"

And laughing at the comedy with which she hoped to impose upon lynx-eyed Benita, Chiquita covered her head in a twinkling.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TEST OF TRUTHFULNESS.

As he descended from his chamber, Don Jose Monteiro da Rocha was as fine a specimen of manhood as one is often privileged to see.

He wore a ruffled night-dress, buff trowsers, and boots with legs of Russia leather coming half way up the thigh; and carried a naked sword in his hand.

Tall and rather slender in build, with fine clear-cut feature, his gray hair and long pointed chin-whisker contrasting with his dark complexion, he had a distinguished, aristocratic bearing, as one born to command.

Out into the chaparral he hastened, to find several half-dressed stablemen already arrived before him, with lanterns.

They were gathered about a man who was struggling fiercely in the grasp of another.

"Curse him, I will kill him! Unhand me!" hoarsely, through his clinched teeth, cried he who was struggling to free himself.

"But he is bound, señor! He is a prisoner! You cannot so dishonor yourself!" protested he who held the madman.

These in Spanish. Then came a ringing challenge in unadulterated Saxon:

"Strike off these bonds, and then let that fool come at me!"

"Peace! peace!" shouted Don Jose. "What is all this turmoil in the dead of night?"

"Ah! the commandant! Thank God!"

And the man who was struggling to restrain Alverado Saumarez fell away, trusting to the Don's authority to effect what he found so arduous.

"What is this, nephew?" demanded the Don.

"Look for yourself!" answered Alverado, with a sullen wave of the hand in the direction of the prisoner who lay bound on the ground.

"What! a prisoner? Bring lights here. Who is he? Why has he been taken?"

"Let me not see him, or I will drive my dagger to his heart!" growled Alverado, putting his hand to his eye, which was puffing up with the prospect of his soon being unable to see out of it.

"Tut! tut! this is childish!" remonstrated the Don, impatiently. "We are not assassins. If he has given offense, we are the guardians of the law. But you, if you are so testy, had better stay away from him. Men, take the prisoner up, and carry him to the strong-room. We will have an examination in the morning."

The lanterns disclosed Charley Osborne in a sorry plight. Blood flowed from several ugly wounds, and in the struggle his clothes had been torn and soiled with dirt.

"Hold on, Don da Rocha!" he shouted, excitedly. "You have no right to hold me a prisoner, any more than your hound of a nephew and his villainous bravos had to fall upon me like the pack of dogs they are. Release me, or I'll fetch a party of fellows who will pull your rookery about your ears!"

Disdaining to reply to this tirade, the old Don by a haughty wave of the hand indicated his wish that the prisoner be taken away forthwith.

Alverado's men stood back, as if they washed their hands of the affair, now that another than their chief had assumed command.

Alverado himself was nursing his hurts at a distance, too much enraged to look at the man who, as he supposed, had humiliated him at the fandango by planting his foot on his breast, and in the last struggle had knocked him down with a blow that revealed to him a thousand stars on no astronomical chart, and left his head ringing merrily even yet.

The stablemen lifted Charley, and carried him, in spite of his savage raging, into the *casa*, down a flight of stone steps, finally lodging him in a cell where, on a bed of rushes, many an unruly peon had learned wisdom in solitude.

"Follow me into the *casa*," said the old Don, to his nephew. "I wish to learn of this."

Sullenly enough Alverado complied.

"Well?" said Da Rocha, when they had gained the privacy of a room in which the alcalde usually transacted his official business.

"How can I tell you?" responded Alverado. "And yet you must know; therefore as well bluntly."

"Speak!" demanded the old Don, as if he defied anything that could wound him.

"Your daughter—"

"Ha!"

The old man winced and gasped. He had not dreamed of a thrust so near home.

"Well! well! what of my daughter?" he cried, frowning sternly.

"Has made an assignation this night at a public fandango with this dog of an American!"

"You lie! you lie!" fairly shouted the Don, advancing upon his nephew with the point of his sword raised to the level of his breast.

Alverado stood in proud silence, folding his arms over his breast, as if to brave the thrust.

"Your absurd jealousy has carried you too far," pursued Don Jose, his sword quivering as he held it in apparent indecision. "How dare you insult my daughter and—your—your—Dog! I repudiate you! She shall never be anything to you!"

How grandly the old man's eyes blazed! How his beard quivered.

"Let me wash out the stain in his blood!" demanded Alverado. "He shall be free of his bonds. I will meet him as no gentleman should stoop to such a ruffian!"

"But your charge—your absurd charge! What is the man to me? It is my daughter! Exonerate her, sir!—on your knees exonerate her!"

"It is too true!" insisted Saumarez. "I would to God I had not lived to see her so degraded—"

"Hold! hold! I have my sword-point at your throat! Though my own blood flowed in your veins, you should not conclude and live!"

And it was true! The enraged old man had sprung forward, and the point of his sword, quivering like the tongue of a serpent, almost pricked the skin of his nephew's neck.

"Drive it through!" cried Alverado, desperate with his humiliation.

He, the vainest coxcomb in Southern California, to have the foot of an accursed American on his breast!

"Your proofs! your proofs!" insisted Don Jose, neither able to listen to his daughter's indiscretion, nor to stand by his refusal to believe it.

"She was there, dancing in rivalry with another! I tore the mask from her face!"

"What! what! you villain! You exposed her to the gaze of that rabble?"

"She was not seen," said Alverado, speaking the truth unguardedly. "He drew her *robosa* about her face."

"Hah! A better man than thou!" cried the old Don. "By my faith, a better man than thou!"

Alverado, seeing his mistake, subsided into sulky silence, but not without many an internal oath of rage.

"And now—where is she now?" demanded her father.

"In the house by this time, I make no doubt," answered Alverado. "We followed her and that dog here, and took him after they had parted."

"And your fellows know it!—all the world

will know it!" groaned the old Don, stamping his foot furiously. "Why did you follow them here? Why did not you attack him in the town, and connive at her escape? Then no one need have known. There would have been no proof, even if suspicion got on the scent. And we could have smitten the mouth of scandal if it dared breathe a word—"

"But no! This cannot be true! I will put it to the test! She shall to a nunnery if it be true!"

And leaving his nephew to his own reflections, he strode off to knock at the door of his daughter's apartments.

The delay in answering his summons augmented his fears; and he was in a mood to beat the door in when Benita finally opened it.

"Beast!" he cried, menacing her with his sword-point. "You have betrayed your trust! What villainous plot is this?"

"Mother of God, attest my innocence!" cried Benita, quailing before his wrath.

"My daughter! my daughter!" commanded the old Don.

"Your daughter? She is in bed, sir—sweet angel!—a good three hours ago!"

"Well for you if that be so! Let me see her!"

"Of a truth, sir, she is at your command!"

"Talk! talk! Bring her here!"

"If you will accord her a moment for preparation, sir—"

"Not a moment! Bring her here as she is. Is she not my child? You shall have no time for preparation to deceive me. Produce her on the minute!"

"How, woman? You yourself have not seen your bed, though it is long past midnight! Is it your wont to watch the night out in prayer?"

He held up to read her face the lantern which he had brought with him, having taken it from one of the stablemen. Of course the room was otherwise in total darkness.

"Sir!" quavered Benita, "the saints and all good angels are my witnesses, that I fell asleep in my chair!"

"My daughter! Away!" cried the Don, waving her to his child's chamber with a swing of the lantern.

She hobbled off, glad to escape him; and he proceeded to light a lamp from the wick of the lantern.

Benita burst into Francisca's chamber, to find her sitting up in bed, with Chiquita, as we know, cowering under the coverlets, in pretended fear of robbers.

Near the head of the bed stood a prie-dieu, with a crucifix, before which burned a small taper.

This shed a faint illumination on the apartment, enough to distinguish objects. Besides, the light from the lantern and the lamp which Don Jose was igniting followed Benita through the door.

"It is the commandant, your father," announced Benita, breathlessly. "Señorita—"

"Ah! is it then the ladrones?" cried Chiquita, popping her head from under the coverlets. "Oh, I have died the death with fear! Sweet Mother Benita, they have not slain you? The saints be—"

"Peace, little hussy! I would that the Don might skewer your busy tongue while his sword is in readiness!"

"Pray God he may never be of your mood, old cat!" retorted Chiquita, jumping out of bed as nimbly as if she were entirely relieved from her scare, and disposed to laugh at it.

But as the bar of light from the other room fell upon her, she shrunk back with every appearance of having made a startling discovery.

"Hush! hush!" she breathed. "It is the commandant, your worshipful father!"

"My father!" gasped poor Francisca, at a loss what to say, yet fearing to remain silent.

"He insists upon seeing you, at once!" said Benita.

"I will dress directly—"

"He will not wait. At once, without delay! He commanded it."

Francisca arose, scarce able to sustain herself on her feet with terror.

Chiquita threw a light shawl about her mistress's shoulders, at the same time breathing into her ear:

"Courage! courage! I am with you!"

So, like a young queen going before her judges, Francisca entered the presence of her father, first one dainty bare foot and then the other thrust from beneath her night-robe as she walked.

"And you, little hussy!" cried Benita, trying to seize and detain Chiquita, who was following her mistress. "Have you no modesty?"

"A patriarch, and my master!" said Chiquita to herself. "Surely, the old prude is too nice!"

But without making this extenuation audible, the little maid eluded the duenna's grasp, and slipped into the *boudoir*, to stand in an attitude of timidity with her arm about her mistress's waist.

She saw that Francisca, with her eyes on the floor, now crimson to the roots of her hair and now pale as death with humiliation at her escapade, had never before so needed her help as now. And at the risk of insolence, she braved all to give it.

"Ah! excellenza," she breathed, "it is not robbers? The noise startled me from my sleep; and I—little coward!—ran and jumped into the bed of this poor angel, waking her with my babble, and frightening her so that she can scarce stand!"

Don Jose, his sword-point lowered to the floor, stood gazing with an inquiring and at the same time reproachful scrutiny, at his daughter.

"Were you asleep, Francisca?" was all he asked, in a low, unnatural voice.

And she, dumb for a moment of unutterable anguish—for she saw the blighting of her happiness, possibly the death of her lover, hanging in the balance—she, growing paler and paler till it seemed as if every drop of blood in her body had receded from her heart, lifted her eyes to her father's, and answered, in a hoarse whisper, yet truthfully:—

"No, my father!"

For a moment they two gazed into each other's souls. What was it that old Don Jose Monteiro da Rocha saw before him? Such high courage, such unflinching loyalty to truth, as had left the pure women and brave men of his long line without a stain from generation to generation!

The dismay in the little maid's face—she having lied as glibly as if words were meant but for deception—said:—

"All is lost! She avows it!"

Francisca's face said only:

"I am ready!"

Before that face the proud old Don bowed, as if in reverence to his ancestors, of whom she was the last representative, and turning on his heel, strode out of the room, drawing to the door behind him.

A faint sigh escaped Francisca's lips, her eyes closed, and she sagged over upon the shoulder of her faithful little maid.

"Help! help, old shrew!" cried Chiquita, but in a voice guarded so that the retreating father should not hear her. "She has fainted! Ah, these villains! Have they no mercy on her?"

We have seen that Chiquita was not always nice about the justice of her denunciations; and it is to be feared that by "these villains" she now meant more particularly Don Jose. It is perhaps a palliating circumstance that her bitterness grew out of her love for her mistress.

Growling over sundry suspicions that had taken form in her mind, Benita came to the little maid's assistance, and between them Francisca was carried back to bed, and finally restored to consciousness.

While Benita was yet busy with her ministrations, Chiquita slipped away, to flit along the darkened corridors like a white-vestured ghost, till she reached Don Jose's room.

A thread of light under the door showed that he had not yet retired; and, after a momentary hesitation, in which she crossed herself, and besought the kindly disposition of the saints, she opened the door and glided across the threshold.

Don Jose sat with his elbow on a table and his head upon his hand, absorbed in painful meditation. So deeply engrossed was he, indeed, that he did not look up as the girl entered the room, nor even move when she sunk on her knees at his feet, clasping and pressing her face against the back of the hand that hung listlessly at his side.

"Imprison me! starve me! do what you will with me!" she exclaimed, brokenly; "but it was I! It can be proved to you—Benita will understand, now that I confess it!—that I at the church made an appointment with this strange Americano. I dropped my handkerchief, and in it a note—not openly to him, but of a pretense to Gomez, yet really for his eye—saying that I should be at the fandango this night. I went; Senor Alverado unmasked me to the gaze of all, but for the quickness with which the Americano threw my *robosa* about my face, and knocked him down."

For the life of her Chiquita could not have withheld this malicious bit of detail, which she feared might not otherwise reach the ears of the Don.

"On my return," she resumed, "my sweet mistress discovered me stealing in. I begged her not to betray me. You saw her agitation. She could not utter an untruth; yet you were forcing her to break silence. Now whip me with stripes, if you will! Give me over to the tender mercies of Benita! I avow it!—it was I!"

Without lifting his head from his hand, without looking at the suppliant, the old Don withdrew the hand that she had wet with her tears, and passed it tenderly over her hair.

"Get thee to bed, little Chiquita!" was all that he said, in a low and very gentle tone.

"Get thee to bed and to sleep!"

In grateful surprise the little maid drew his hand around and kissed it, first in the palm, and then on the back, and so stole out of the room again.

Don Jose, when she was gone, dropped his head still lower on his arms lying on the table, and groaned:

"Even our women!"

But ere long he started up, the slumberous pain in his eyes looking out from a face set to lines of haughty sternness.

"I will see what manner of man this is!" he declared, taking up the lantern and going out.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PROUD OLD MAN.

WHEN Tom Templeton was "down," so that no amount of "kicking" would help the matter, it was his nature to submit in dignified silence, on the alert the while for shifting fortune to "give him a show."

Not so Charley Osborne. He chafed in his bonds, and blustered for the sake of bluster. Though utterly helpless, he did not cease to fling defiance at his enemy as long as there was the slightest chance of his voice being heard if not heeded.

However, when left to his own reflections, he never would take adverse fate quite seriously: so now, when the cell door had closed upon him, he proceeded to cast up the situation in his usual vein of half mockery.

"This, then, is what they call merited retribution, poetical justice!"

"A gentleman and scholar in my position—so recently come under the dominion of lovely woman in the person of the fairest of her sex—would have spent the evening, while banished from her smiles, in mooning over her external charms and internal virtues. He would have kept out of harm's way. He would have been virtuous and happy! To be sure, he would have lost some fun!"

"On the other hand, a black-hearted villain, like your humble servant, no sooner slips the silken noose than he goes roving! He stumbles into the first fandango that comes to hand! He bows down before the golden ca—ahem!—before the first little bundle of nonsense he espies, and wallows in perfidy! Not content with playing the liar and scoundrel in the wretched present—a traitor to love, a barterer of honor, a breaker of trusting hearts, and all that sort of thing!—he must needs pave the way for future iniquity by following this pretty little delusion and snare home; and so run his head into a sling—as instance, yours to command! To be sure, he has a rattling good time; but, alas! he sups in sorrow!"

And Charley sighed dismally, as if he were indeed doing bitter penance for his shortcomings.

"So Tom," he resumed, with a doleful shake of his head, "Tom gets the mistress, and I get the maid! I get all the kicks, he all the half-pence! Heads, you win; tails, I lose! It's a mighty unequal world, this!"

"But what will that suffering angel think, when her devoted doctor fails to show up in the morning? Four visits the first day—that's professional enough! But none thereafter!—not even a bill to collect!"

"Will Tom do the handsome thing by me? If he only has the wit to tell her that I was compelled to visit a patient who turned out to be down with small-pox, and that I remain away so as to run no risk of conveying the contagion to her! That's a bright idea! I'll note it down, to use myself, if I ever get out of this hole!"

"What's my show, I wonder? I'll call that villain out, and put a bullet through him, if he ever relaxes the grip he has on me now! That will be a service to Tom, anyway."

In this defiant mood Don Jose found his prisoner.

He entered with a stately stride, set the lantern on the floor, and stood looking gloomily down upon a man lying bound hand and foot on a litter of rushes, his clothes disarranged and torn, his face disfigured with dirt and blood.

"Well!" said Charley, repaying his glance with a stare of wrathful defiance, "take a good look at me, so that you will know me again, when you see me over the barrel of a revolver!"

Seemingly unmoved by this fling, Don Jose stooped and untied the prisoner's bonds.

He did this, not apparently from any pity or good will, but with the cold disdain of a man who consults only his sense of what is due himself.

"Well!" said Charley, as he rose to a sitting posture and straightened his cramped limbs, "I'm free to confess that you have some little decency about you, more than I looked for in a gentleman of your stamp!"

"This was certainly ungracious; but still the old Don was imperturbable.

He turned, and going to the door, called through the grating of a little wicket in the upper part of it:

"Gomez!"

The jailer, who was on guard outside, came at his summons, to receive some order in Spanish, which of course Charley did not understand.

Then Don Jose turned round, and leaning his back against the door, stood looking at the prisoner with a gloomy frown, his arms folded and his chin resting upon his breast.

"Who are you?" he asked, not intending perhaps to be uncivil, yet unconsciously with the intonation of a judge quizzing a vagabond.

"You will know who I am, after I have met that villainous nephew of yours!" retorted Charley, nothing abashed by the dignity of his interrogator, nor by their relations as captor and captive.

"Still," insisted the Don, with the unruffled coldness of one who is above the reach of insolence, "you have a name, a—"

"Bah!" he scoffed, with a sudden flash of

scorn that, born of long harbored hatred, took him by surprise, and burst its way through his studied disdain, "one of these nameless vagabonds!"

"The world has been full of such vagabonds!" retorted Charley, quickly. "They go about as conquerors!"

The shot struck home. The old Don started and quivered. A lambent flame seemed to leap into his eyes, peering from under his grizzled and beetling brows like lions glaring through the bars of their cage. He drew breath with a hoarse, rasping sound, and gnawed his lip in spite of all effort at self-command.

From that on he remained silent, till Gomez appeared, with four men at his back.

"Ah!" breathed Charley to himself, "the villains are going to give me an outing early! If he is fool enough to give me a show outside of this accursed dungeon with both hands and feet free, I'll try to show him a Yankee trick worth remembering! What does he take me for?"

But at sight of the men who were about to file into the cell, Don Jose stamped his foot impatiently and waved them back, as if their coming had been no part of his order; and Gomez entered alone.

"Commandant," began the jailer, with the chagrin of one apologizing for an inadvertent offense.

"Enough!" interrupted Don Jose, pointing toward the prisoner.

Crestfallen, Gomez advanced to Charley, set a copper basin on the floor before him, poured into it water from an earthen ewer, and then stood waiting with a towel over his arm.

"Well!" ejaculated Charley, gazing in surprise and gratification at these welcome accommodations, "you've got the soul of a Christian in you, after all! Cleanliness is next to godliness! I'm no maser; but I reckon I'll feel more comfortable, if I'm not better looking, after a good wash! Small favors thankfully received, and large ones in proportion! I don't know, senor, but I may have come down on you a trifle rougher than you deserve. It's that blackguard of a nephew of yours that I ought to save my ammunition for, maybe!"

Don Jose stood as little affected by this qualified concession as he had been by the previous unqualified denunciation.

Charley, paying no further heed to his captor, and treating Gomez as if he were his servant, proceeded to refresh himself with a thorough bathing of face, neck, and head generally; after which he produced a small comb from his pocket, and arranged his hair and mustache, ordering Gomez to hold the lantern so that he could use the water in his basin as a mirror.

Finally he shook his coat and dusted his trousers as best he could, remarking:

"If it had occurred to you to fetch a whisk, I would have doubled my tip."

And he put a coin into the hand of the staring Gomez.

"Now, sir!" he said, bowing to Don Jose, "I am yours to command. You have treated me like a gentleman. I apologize for my rudeness when you first came in upon me. I wasn't in a pleasant humor—you must admit that there were some disturbing features to the situation!—and I misjudged your disposition toward me."

The Don waited for Gomez to withdraw, and then scanned Charley in silence from head to foot.

As he stood under this critical examination, Charley Osborne was a good-looking fellow. His good-natured face, his fearless eye, his commanding figure, combined with a certain air of devil-may-care self-complacency, made him a man who might well take the eye of any woman. If he had been a Spaniard the old Don acknowledged to himself that he would have been proud of him. But he was of the conquering race. The finer the man, the more formidable; therefore the more hated.

"Will you now tell me," said the Don, speaking at last, "how came you to be here?"

"By the favor of your rascally nephew, backed by a dozen or so of his blackguards," answered Charley, promptly.

"You were trespassing in my grounds at an unseemly hour," suggested the Don, ignoring the tone Charley chose to take. "Why?"

"Is this a revival of the Spanish Inquisition, Sir Alcalde?" asked Charley, to gain time to devise a reply which would shield the little coquette without a direct lie.

"I do not come to you as a magistrate," answered the Don, humbling his pride as never before in his life.

"Still, since I have been arrested like a common vagabond, I prefer to await a more formal trial. Let your nephew bring his charge in the morning. I will meet him in open court, and from there take an appeal to a court to which he has no natural right of admittance—the court to which gentlemen resort."

"As man to man, you refuse?" appealed the old Don, the anguish that racked him plainly apparent in his drawn face.

"I have refused nothing," protested Charley.

"Must I defend myself before I am accused?"

The Don looked at him, his head hanging forward, beads of perspiration on his brow, his

face fairly haggard, his eyes appealingly reproachful.

Then, his glance wavering, his fingers working nervously, he began again:

"Was my—did my—my—daughter— Oh, my God!"

And overcome with shame, he dropped his face into his hands, his whole frame shaken by gasping sobs.

Then, as if he could endure this repression no longer, he threw out his trembling hands in supplication, and burst forth brokenly:

"Tell me! and as you hope for mercy, tell me truly—did my daughter make an assignation with you this night? Did she go to a public fandango to meet you? How have you bewitched her, so that she could forget—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Charley, seeing the way open to an evasion that would let him out of the scrape without compromising any one. "I don't know your daughter, except by hearsay; and if that blackguard of a nephew of yours says that she met me at a fandango, or anywhere else for that matter, he's a liar! Of course he's a liar, anyway; but in this case he's an infamous liar!"

"On your honor as a man!" cried the old Don, clasping his hands, and almost going down on his knees.

"On the honor of a gentleman!" answered Charley, gazing directly into the eyes that scanned his searchingly.

For a moment Don Jose looked at him as if to read his soul, and then dropped his face into his hands again.

The struggle with emotion was a terrible one. On the one hand, his pride urged him to accept this assurance; on the other, his knowledge of the world told him that, if this man really loved his daughter, he would stop at nothing to shield her from censure.

Charley had inadvertently replied—"On the honor of a gentleman!"—when the Don himself had said—"On the honor of a man!"

Don Jose now asked himself:

"What, when the code of gentlemanly honor demands that he defend the woman even to the point of perjury?"

Then, though he had gone down in the mud of humiliation to settle this point, the weakness of his pride of caste mastered him. He did not press the question of what this stranger had been doing in such a place at such a time, but turned away, adding brokenly:

"To the honor of a gentleman I appeal, begging you to forget this interview!"

"You may rely upon my discretion," responded Charley, liking the old aristocrat in spite of himself.

Whereupon the Don left the cell, in his agitation forgetting the lantern.

With bowed head he walked along the corridors toward his own room; nor did he look up as he passed his nephew, who was evidently waiting to speak to him.

"Eccellenza!" said Alverado.

But the Don kept on by as unmoved as if the speaker were a post.

Bursting with rage as the door of his uncle's room closed shutting him out, Saumarez stamped off to his own part of the house, vowing vengeance upon every one concerned in his repeated humiliations.

Meanwhile Gomez, backed by his little *posse* of stablemen, had returned to the cell in which Charley Osborne was incarcerated.

"It is all very well for his Excellency to treat a prisoner like a guest," said honest Gomez, in Spanish which relieved his own mind, though it conveyed no intelligence to the person addressed. "But I am no gentleman, thank God! and if I am to be held accountable for you when wanted, I prefer to put my trust in good stout hemp, rather than in paroles of honor."

And with this apology he set his fellows to work to replace the bonds from which Charley had been temporarily relieved.

"I'm about where I was before the gov'nor honored me with his visit!" laughed Charley. "Say, you son of a sea-cook! it's a pity you haven't had the advantage of some lessons in surgery! Have a little regard for my circulatory system, if you please! If you weren't such a cowardly lot of coyotes, you would trust to these stone walls and iron bars to hold an average-sized mortal. Do you fancy that I'm a Samson, and that I'll walk off with your doors on my back between now and morning?"

The peons laughed, one or two of them who were most familiar with English explaining his sarcasm to the others. However, they persisted in trussing him up in the most approved style, and left him without even the consolation of a light.

How long he remained alone, he did not know. But he had nearly fallen asleep, when he was startled into vivid wakefulness by the sound of some one approaching his cell.

If it had been the heavy tread of his jailer, Gomez, he would have thought nothing of it; but whoever it was came with a stealthiness of tread that sent cold shivers through him.

"It is that assassin, Alverado, or one of his bravos, creeping upon me to drive a knife into my heart!" cried Charley, within himself. "They must have found my jailer asleep. If

they had bribed him, they would not come so stealthily. Must I yell for help to such a cur?"

Nothing is more repugnant to a true son of the West, than to acknowledge himself unequal to any strait. So Charley waited and listened, holding out till the last moment before he would appeal to those whom he despised.

Some one stopped at the door. In the intense stillness he could hear their breathing. After a moment's indecision, the key was cautiously slipped into the lock, and the bolts thrown back. Then the door opened noiselessly, and some one crept in.

"He thinks I am asleep!" said Charley to himself; "but he'll catch a surprise on the fly!"

And he gathered his feet up, prepared to dash them against the breast of the skulking bravo.

CHAPTER XV.

A SURPRISED LOVER.

IN more ways than one Maud Granville was a very capable young person.

To begin with, she was a keen observer, and so had a strong sense of locality. As little as she had seen of San Hernandez, she had well in mind the general directions of the only places in which she had any practical concern.

Better than even this—in an emergency, as we have seen, she did not lose her head. At a time when others were rushing blindly helter-skelter, she knew just what she wanted to accomplish, and how best to set about it.

It was natural that Tom should yield to Francisca's guidance, trusting to her knowledge of the town to lead them the surest way. Therefore Maude coolly took that matter out of his hands.

Secure in her disguise, she had been playing a very bold part with Charley Osborne; and you may believe she was not foolish enough to take him into her confidence in this matter, if it could be helped, till she had him securely hooked as her husband, and thoroughly broken to her management.

Therefore, having no desire to fall in with him again that night, she, upon reaching the street, turned in the direction leading away from the *casa* of the old Don.

Her first plan had been to elude Charley at the fandango, when it came time to go home. After the fracas which drove her from the dancing hall in his company, there was nothing left but to get rid of him in the street, and then make her way alone back to her *fonda*.

Now Maude was shrewd enough to guess that it would be next to impossible to drop Charley Osborne in the street, after such an adventure as theirs had been, without his being first satisfied who she was, so that he could find her again when he wanted her.

She had not the least doubt that he would without scruple shadow her, after having pretended to accept his dismissal.

With Tom Templeton the case was very different. He was desperately in love with Francisca; and after any one of a hundred excuses had been given for wishing to part with him and go on alone—and Maude had no doubt of her powers of plausible invention—he would make it a point of honor to observe her wishes to the letter.

But if everything failed, and discovery was forced upon her, she would much rather it was Tom who knew than Charley. She could pledge him to secrecy; and whatever his opinions when Charley came to tell of his adventure—as Maude had not the least doubt he would—Tom she knew would keep his own counsel and not interfere with her.

Of course the assumption of Francisca's identity involved certain tender passages with Tom; but to such a flirt as Maude Granville this appeared as a good joke, rather than as anything very serious.

"I sha'n't suffer any loss of appetite from having to kiss such a good-looking fellow as Tom!" she said to herself, with a covert laugh. "But if he knew! Wouldn't he make a wry face?"

One thing she had not failed to take into consideration. If her identity was discovered, it would be an easy thing to pretend to be as greatly astonished at the ascertainment of who her escort was, as was Tom himself to learn that she was not Francisca. She would say that, torn from Charley by the ruffian who had dashed into them in the darkness, she had caught at his arm, securing Tom's without knowing the difference.

Of course Tom would then be wild about Francisca's fate. But, where somebody must suffer in any event, Maude preferred that it should not be she. And at worst, there would be compensation in the delight of discovering that Francisca was all right, through the care of his friend.

Tom's lover-like solicitude would not permit him to proceed very far without anxious inquiry as to whether his companion had sustained any injury; and in guarded whispers Maude gave him every assurance that she was all right.

A little further, and he observed:

"But, Francisca, is this the right direction? We are going further and further away from the *casa*. You haven't got confused, dear, and lost your way?"

"Oh, the wretch!" cried Maude, to herself. "He couldn't wait a minute! Even to her name! Now I must give a big jump and a little scream, and pretend to be dreadfully alarmed at finding myself with the wrong man; or I must burn my bridges behind me, and go on to the bitter end."

It did not take her long to resolve to go on. "And do you think," she whispered, "that I would take you straight into the trap? Will not the road to the *casa* be watched?"

"That's so," admitted Tom. "What a shrewd little manager you are to think of it!"

"Spoons!" laughed Maude, to herself. "He takes to admiration as a duck takes to the water. Won't she lead him a dance though—if she isn't as big a fool over him as he is evidently going to be over her. I shall have to get rid of him pretty soon or I shall laugh in his face!"

And this she at once proceeded to do.

Stopping, and assuming an attitude of affected shyness, she said, in the same flowing Spanish to which she had adhered, supposing that she could best keep up the deception in this language, in which Tom was not familiar with her voice:

"And now you must let me go on alone from here. It will be safer so."

"Leave you to find your way to the *casa* in the dark, at this time of night, alone and unprotected?" cried Tom, in amazement.

"What have I to fear?" asked Maude. "Not even Alverado and his men, unless I am found in your company."

"But there are others prowling about—"

"Not one to whom I am personally known. Not one who would dare to molest me. Besides, I shall move like a shadow. You need not fear; no one will discover me."

Tom did not accede all at once, but she finally, with increased hesitation, urged that her real danger grew out of his attendance.

It would increase as they approached the *casa*, all of the approaches to which might be watched.

"If I am discovered alone, I can smooth the matter over with my father, though he will be desperately angry; but if taken actually in your company— Ah, you do not know! My father loves me tenderly, but he hates all Americans with a bitterness that I cannot describe to you! Oh, I fear that he should hurry me off to Mexico, and imprison me in a nunnery where you would never find me! We must be very, very careful!"

Tom clasped her to his heart with a dread beyond words.

Finally he let her go, and then stood still, listening to her retreating footsteps with bated breath.

Should he follow her at a distance, so as to be at hand if she was attacked?

But, as she had urged, he was her greatest peril. Personally, she needed no defense from Alverado's men. The other Mexicans she had no fear of; and Golden Bow being on the other side of San Hernandez, there was little, if any chance of her encountering any of the Americans.

Still, Tom's heart stood still at the thought of the darkness and desolation.

She had been gone certainly not more than a minute, when Tom's heart was brought into his throat, by a piercing scream from the direction she had taken.

Then came men's voices raised in excitement, another scream, and yet a third smothered half-way, followed by the sound of horses' hoofs galloping in full retreat.

Long before this point was reached, Tom had thrown every caution to the winds, and bounded to the relief of his assailed love.

"She cried my name! She would not have done that unless she knew that she was in deadly peril! They are not the accursed Greaser's men! Oh, my God! Francisca! Francisca, my darling, what has come upon you? Oh, that I should have listened to her!"

So he rushed headlong into an ambush, and was soon engaged in a desperate conflict, in which he could see his foes only by the flash of his revolvers.

Desperately he fought, shouting for help in the hope that some American might be within sound of his voice.

He heard nothing further of his recent companion, after that third, smothered cry, and believed that she had been carried off on horseback.

Fiercely he sought to break through the ranks of his enemies, to keep on in pursuit of her abductor; but as determinedly they obstructed his way, striving to effect his capture.

At last he heard voices answering his shouts. His own countrymen were coming to his aid. But the thought had scarcely been realized when he experienced a dazzling flash of light, produced by a stunning blow on the head, followed by oblivion.

They found him stunned and bleeding, his antagonists fled.

In that rayless night, the very stars being hidden by a pall of clouds, no pursuit was possible. His assailants had disappeared like shadows.

Execrating the Greaser bandits, and swearing vengeance, they bore him through the town and across the river to Golden Bow.

Meanwhile, Maude Granville had brought her fate upon herself.

Sancho Pastenza was a veritable bandit, as Perside's mother had called him. He was a dashing fellow, with just the spice of romance about him to fascinate the little Perside. Aside from his disregard of property rights, he had much the same virtues and vices as other men. Truth to tell, he could make himself very agreeable to the ladies, when it pleased him.

Weighing the matter in her own mind, Perside had resolved to "have him," very much on the principle of the father who advised his son to "put money in thy purse—honestly if possible!" She would first try to reclaim him to law-abiding society; but if this failed, she would go to him in his mountain fastness.

Now Perside's notions of right and wrong were such as grow up where law is as often used for purposes of oppression as for protection. If she objected to a brigand, it was not on moral grounds. Indeed, she thought that brigands, as a class, were charming fellows! But then, they were always liable to be shot or hanged!

To-night she had fixed upon a proposal to make to Sancho. It was characteristic! Capture old Don Monteiro da Rocha—so ran her suggestion—and fix his ransom at a pardon for Sancho himself and such of his men as wished to disband. Then come to San Hernandez; and Perside would do her part to make him the happiest man in the world!

Meanwhile Sancho had ideas of his own on the subject. He had made up his mind as to the state of Perside's heart, and also as to the severity of her moral scruples. He did not believe that they would present any serious obstacle to her happiness, if he ran away with her in time-honored bandit style, forced some priest to solemnize their nuptials, and installed her as the queen of his mountain band.

Moreover, this programme he had come prepared to carry out, if the fandango developed nothing to brighten his hopes.

It had developed more than he bargained for! First, maddened by jealousy, afterward ravished with delight at the dancing, he resolved to possess himself of her, willy-nilly, and without running any further risk of losing her while dancing attendance upon her whims.

He might have lost her in the darkness, but for the chance that, as she fled from the garden, a bar of light from another part of the house fell upon her dress; and from that moment he never lost sight of her and Tom.

Luckily for his scheme, he and his men as a requirement of their crafty vocation, were shod in buckskin, and thus could track their quarry without danger of self-betrayal.

Seeing that they were going directly toward a point where he had the horses of his party secreted, Sancho resolved to follow them up to the last moment, and effect the capture when he could immediately mount and away!

Then came the parting; and seeing an opportunity to capture his sweetheart without a fight which might endanger her life, Sancho made a *detour* with some of his men, and got in advance, so as to be prepared for her to walk into his arms.

She did walk into his arms, without the slightest warning.

In the character of Francisca, Maude had stated her confidence of consideration at the hands of Alverado's men; but in her own character, she had no reason to expect it from them or any other set of Greasers.

Consequently, without stopping to ascertain into whose hands she had fallen, she screamed at the top of her lungs, and followed it up immediately with the name of Tom. The discovery of her escapade was nothing compared with capture by a lot of ruffians.

But Sancho proved himself as skillful as Tom at twisting a lady's *robosa* about her face; and Maude soon found herself in danger of suffocation, while she was caught off her feet, and mounted before her captor on a horse that immediately bounded away, she knew not whither.

It is not to be wondered at, that the terror of such a position should deprive of consciousness even one usually so self-possessed as Maude.

When he felt her hanging limp in his arms, Sancho removed the *robosa* from her face; and as soon as he was far enough away from the town to feel free from the danger of pursuit, he slowed his horse down to a walk, and carried her with all tenderness, caressing her fondly, and appealing to her to open her sweet eyes and grant him forgiveness.

When he was overtaken by the rest of his party, with the intelligence that they had been driven away from the man they were left to capture by the appearance of a party of Americans, he swore a little, but seemed well content with what he had secured.

The ride up into the mountains consumed the rest of the night; and the eastern sky would have been brightening, but that it was overcast by clouds, when they entered a gorge where several low huts marked their headquarters.

Into one of these Sancho bore his prize, shouting to some one within to appear and produce a light, and build a fire.

Frightened at the long coma in which his supposed sweetheart had lain, and chiding himself in ludicrously exaggerated terms with having murdered her, he laid her on a settle, before which he knelt in agony of despair.

The shock of terror that Maude had sustained was great enough to prostrate her for a considerable time under the most favorable circumstances of recuperation; but during her long ride her nervous system had had time to repair the ravages of that paralyzing convulsion; and now, when her head was lowered so that the blood could flow back into the brain, she recovered consciousness naturally.

She found herself lying she knew not where in the dark, her head supported on the breast of a man who was crying out, in accents of the keenest distress:

"Ah! light of my life! she has gone out forever! And it is I—beast! villain! murderer of innocence!—I that have slain her! Piteous Mother of God, give her back to me!"

She was "given back to him" with a vengeance!

No wildcat ever struck out more viciously than did Maude Granville, as she tore herself from poor Sancho's arms, leaving the marks of her finger nails scored on his face.

"Who are you, you scoundrel?" she cried, leaping from the settle, and shrinking to the furthest corner of the darkened hut.

"Death of my body!" roared Sancho, now in a fine rage—so furious indeed at this repayment of his love, that he did not notice that his captive did not speak with the voice of his sweetheart.

"Holy mother! what is this?" snarled the quavering voice of an old woman, who at this juncture came groping into the room, evidently startled from sleep by the imperious demand of her master. "You've brought a young vixen here, have you, to torment my life out of me; and you're clapper-clawing with her already! He! he! he! he!"

"Where am I? Oh, my good woman! save me! save me! Who is the wretch that has brought me to this terrible place? Oh, you are a woman! You will surely protect me!"

And now completely unnerved, Maude almost crept to the feet of the hag whom she could not see, clinging to her skirts.

"Oh, I'll protect ye! I'll protect ye!" crackled the old wretch. "I'm famous for it! But when you get the flavor of my protection, I fancy you will be for flying to Sancho for protection from me. Feel of my claws!"

And reaching down in the darkness, she scratched Maude viciously.

"A light! a light!" roared Sancho. "Miserable hell-cat! shall I break every bone in your body? A light! a light, I say! All sweet saints and angels, who has bewitched my darling? A light! a light! or I will grind you to dust under my feet!"

Muttering wrathfully, like a surly dog that growls while he slinks away, the hag groped her way to the fireplace, where she was soon heard striking a flint and steel.

Shivering with terror, and not knowing which way to fly for the door, Maude cowered against the wall, to await the horror the light would reveal.

She only knew that she was the captive of some hideous ruffian who had held her in a passionate embrace. She felt for a revolver with which she had armed herself before setting out on her bold adventure, and clutched it with a thrill of fierce delight, when she found it in its place of hiding, resolved to kill her abductor, and then herself if necessary.

The sparks flew into the tinder, and then the old woman began to blow.

The glow that first illuminated her face, disclosed as ugly a visage as one need wish to look upon. It looked like a wrinkled leather mask.

Then came the flame, and the lighting of an old-fashioned iron lamp, which was nearly the shape of a gravy-boat, with a bit of rag lying in the lip to serve as a wick.

At the first flare of light Maude rose to her feet, staring at Sancho, who repaid her searching scrutiny with a look of blank amazement.

"Who are you, you scoundrel?" she demanded; "and how dare you assault me in the open street, and drag me off to this horrid place? Do you imagine that such an outrage can be perpetrated, even in this villainous country, without bringing down upon you the vengeance of men who only deign to rub such vermin as you in to the ground?"

She was defiant enough now, standing with her revolver held in plain view, and evidently in an accustomed hand.

Sancho only stared at her, gasping:—

"Death to my soul!"

CHAPTER XVI.

IN CAPTIVITY.

"He! he! he! he!" cackled the old hag, who, having struck the light, now rested on her labors, to enjoy the encounter which she thought was about to take place between an unwilling bride and her abductor. "It is no sugar-plum you have brought to your den, Senior Captain! You have an eye in your head for good-looks on the outside, but she has the devil and all his

angels inside of her—take my word for it! I've seen her sort before! But, he! he! he! you'll find that out without telling from me. *She'll* not keep you in doubt! Little witches for a big Sabbath!"

"Peace, mother of Satan!" shouted Sancho. "Out of my presence, or I'll score your hide!"

"As she has already begun to score your face! He! he! he! I leave you in good company! But it will be some time before you fall to caressing her again as you were doing when I entered! When you give it up, turn her over to me. I'll fetch her around! It takes old Mother Maldito! I have love-drops that fetch 'em! He! he! he!"

And clucking with fiendish malice, the old hag hobbled out of the room.

Maude's eyes dilated, the blood receded still more from her lips, and a chill of dread crept over her at the ordeal through which she felt she must now pass. But she clutched her revolver, resolved to shoot her enemy in his tracks if worst came to worst.

The first thing that Sancho did when they were alone, was to take off his hat with a polite bow.

"Senorita," he said, employing the common Spanish form of complimentary address to a lady, "I kiss your feet!"

Maude stared at him in astonishment, this courtesy was so diametrically opposite to what she had expected.

Then, interpreting it as a sarcasm, or the pretense at politeness of a man still unshaken in his infamous purpose, a wave of color swept over her face and neck, and her eyes flashed with indignation.

"Will you have the kindness," pursued Sancho, "to tell me who you are?"

"Your prisoner, I suppose!"

"My guest!" he corrected her.

"An exceedingly unwilling one!" she retorted.

"None the less honored!" he insisted.

"Will you tell me why you have brought me here?" demanded she.

She clutched desperately at the hope that, after all, a ransom might prove to be the worst of his designs.

"Your pardon!" pleaded Sancho, with an even more profound bow of deprecation, "if I urge my real inquiry before answering you. It would gratify me to learn how you came by the dress you wear."

Then a light broke suddenly in upon Maude.

"Is it possible," she cried, brightening with relief, "that you are Sancho?"

"Sancho Pastenza, at your service!"

"And you have abducted me, supposing me to be—"

"My little angel, Perside!"

Maude burst into a hysterical laugh.

"Well! well! well!" she cried. "That puts a better face on the matter!"

"To me, senorita," urged the bandit, "it is something of a disappointment—notwithstanding the distinguished honor of your presence!" he added, hastily, with another bow.

"Doubtless!" assented Maude. "But you have the consoling reflection that Perside is not fickle."

"A thousand pardons! But the senorita proceeds faster than I can follow. She forgets that I am yet at a loss to account for this strange substitution."

"It is simple enough. Perside lent me her costume, and I went to the fandango; while she staid at home."

"She was indifferent, then, to the fandango; perhaps disinclined?" said Sancho, with a creeping sort of insinuation.

"Don't be foolish!" exclaimed Maude, impatiently. "I ought not to tell you, but she is crying her eyes out with disappointment."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sancho, his eyes contracting alertly. "Still, she lent the costume—for love of you, no doubt."

"Because she was compelled to!" answered Maude, with a shrug.

"It was her mother?"

"Yes."

"And for money?"

"Exactly. I wanted to go to the fandango, and let nothing stand in the way. I have got my—or, rather, Perside has her revenge! I suppose you were watching me at the fandango, believing I was she; and I owe this summary treatment to your jealousy?"

And again she laughed, almost shrilly.

Now that the danger was over, she was beginning to lose control over her nerves.

"I can never forgive myself for the error!" pleaded Sancho, in deep humility.

"But I will forgive you, if you will take the most expeditious means of returning me to my home."

"Senorita, everything that I command is at your service!"

"Then I beseech you to lose no time in setting out on our return. If I can get back to the *fonda* before I am missed by my friends, no harm will have been done."

Of course she was thinking of Tom and Charley. Perside and her jailers must long since have been wondering what had become of her.

"With the deepest regret, *senorita*, I am forced to tell you that this will be impossible!"

"But I must get home! Everything depends upon it!"

The sudden ebb of color from her face supported her words.

If she did not get back, Charley would learn all.

"If money will facilitate matters any," she went on, "you can promise your men any amount, and I will make it good."

Sancho's eyes twinkled. Her incautious impatience had betrayed her into a very indiscreet suggestion.

"*Senorita* cannot have money with her—at a fandango," he urged, craftily.

"But I can get it as soon as I reach my room," persisted Maude, for the once rendered very obtuse, or reckless, by her desperate strait. "And if that is not enough, I can command more."

"It is not so paltry a consideration as money, I beg you to believe," said Sancho, returning to his gentlemanly elegance. "But the day is upon us. See! it is brightening already."

"So much the greater need for expedition!" urged Maude. "Why waste time in talk? Let us set out at once!"

Sancho bowed, with a deprecating smile.

"It is a question of life—at least of freedom—to my men or me!" he urged. "You may not know the uncharitable rancor against us in San Hernandez. They are so discourteous as to call us bandits! To accompany you thither in the daytime would be attended with the most embarrassing experiences."

"I can go alone, then!"

"And my reputation for hospitality? Perseide would never forgive such treatment of her friend."

Maude drew a deep breath, gazing at him keenly.

"And do you mean to say," she asked, slowly, "that I shall not go?"

"On the contrary, *senorita*, you shall go; but in proper state, with a suitable escort."

"When?" asked Maude, bringing the matter to an issue at once.

"As soon as arrangements can be made to conduct you safely."

Maude had the shrewdness to see that this polite scoundrel was implacable where his personal interests were at stake. She would humble herself in vain with appeals to his sympathy.

There was therefore no use in prolonging this dialogue.

"If you can accommodate me with a cup of coffee," she said, haughtily, "I will sleep till noon."

Sancho's eyes sparkled with admiration. He liked her spirit.

"*Senorita*, you put me under incalculable obligations, by vouchsafing this favor! Mother Maldito is not so bad as she would appear. Permit me to leave her in attendance."

And he bowed himself out, just as daylight was beginning to manifest itself in despite of the thick veil of clouds.

"Well," said Maude to herself, "what can't be cured, must be endured! Charley Osborne will know everything! Will he like me all the better for it, as I believe I should, if our positions were reversed; or will he—"

But the alternative she did not present, even to herself—at least not in words.

Madre Maldito—which in Spanish is as much as if we were to say Mother Curse—appeared to build the fire and prepare breakfast, only regarding Maude with a sarcastic grin as she passed.

"I will thank you to show me a place where I can sleep," said Maude, in a tone of authority.

"There's the bunk the commandant has had prepared for you. I reckon you'll get no other," answered Mother Maldito, with a toss of her thumb over her shoulder.

Maude opened the door of the room indicated, and crossed the threshold, Mother Maldito turning to look after her with her evil grin.

The appointments of the room were of the rudest kind; but there had evidently been some effort to make it attractive. It had a new board floor, the floor of the living room being of earth covered with rushes. It had a glazed window, of only four panes, to be sure; but those of the outer room were mere openings in the wall, closed with shutters. The blankets on the bunk were clean and new. There was a crucifix and a picture of the Virgin, and a rude attempt to decorate the walls with evergreens.

So this was the chamber Sancho had prepared for his bride! What changes natty little Perseide would make in its appearance before it had been hers for a week!

"No," said Maude, turning back and closing the door, "I won't dispossess the poor child any further, whatever the sacrifice of my own comfort. She has cause enough for complaint of me already. This Sancho of hers doesn't seem to be such a bad fellow, after all."

Mother Maldito, watching her with a skulking eye, chuckled softly.

"Get me some blankets. I will occupy this settle," said Maude.

But when she was supplied, she found it impossible to sleep.

Make the best she could of her situation, it was a trying one. She might lose the only man she had ever seriously fancied; and she had no assurance of her captor's ultimate purpose respecting her. Two or three times she had caught an expression of the eye that caused her more and more anxiety, the longer she reflected on it.

"About one thing it is useless to try and deceive myself," she mused. "If my life stands in his way, he will take it, with an apologetic bow!"

When breakfast was prepared, she partook of it, knowing that, whatever eventuated, she would be the better prepared to meet it, thus fortified.

Then suspense bred a spirit of restlessness in her, and rising, she asked:

"Am I a prisoner here—in this room, I mean?"

"Not of my holding!" declared Mother Maldito, energetically. "By my faith! I like your room better than your company! What does my boy find in such a moping chit of a thing, I'd like to know. When I saw you spitting and scratching so bravely, I thought there was to be some sport. But *you!*—pah!"

Without stopping to make any return for this complimentary address, Maude left the hut.

Out of doors the scene was inspiring. The little cluster of huts that marked the headquarters of the bandits, was situated in a gorge with cliffs soaring to the skies on every hand. The clouds were breaking and scattering overhead, and the bright sun was darting long slant beams into the sheltered nook.

Several brigandish-looking fellows were lounging idly about; but, though they glanced at Maude curiously, none of them seemed to have more than a passing interest in her movements.

However, nothing galled the girl so much as uncertainty as to her status; and determined to know the worst at once, she made up to the nearest, and observed:

"I am a prisoner here, of course. Where are my bounds; and who is to keep me in view?"

"The *senorita* is a guest," answered the bandit, with a bow. "It is the commandant's orders that she be treated with distinguished consideration."

"Very well, then! I will take it kindly if you disturb me as little as possible."

"The commandant," added the fellow, as if to leave no room for a misunderstanding, "has every confidence in the *senorita's* discretion."

"Call my notice to the fact, if I overstep the bounds of that discretion."

And Maude turned away, but almost instantly looked back.

"Your commandant—where is he?"

The man smiled indulgently.

"His men never inquire."

"And you do not know when he will return?"

"When it pleases him!"

Maude strode away, feeling as if the air were oppressive.

"I might as well be in a padded room in an insane asylum!" she cried to herself.

Burning to test the limits of her freedom, she began to move about the gorge. No one gave her the slightest heed.

Finally she climbed a steep acclivity, from the apex of which she looked out over a vast expanse of country.

What was her astonishment to find, lying apparently almost at her very feet, a town which she felt confident was none other than San Hernandez! There was the Mission, and there the *casa*!

"Is it possible that these outlaws can live in security so near?" she exclaimed. "Why, it would not take much resolution to make one's way back on foot!"

The thought of escape set her heart to beating wildly.

She knew that the clear air made distances deceptive, especially as viewed from such a height. Nor did she forget that a bee-line of thirty miles or thereabouts might represent twice that distance of circuitous mountain climbing. But, to have her bearings, and to be unimpeded in her movements!

She looked about with the color coming and going in her face. There below her in the gorge nestled the bandit huts, with the picturesque outlaws lounging about as she had left them.

Was it possible that, secure in her woman's helplessness, Sancho had made no provision for her restraint? He did not know her! No man would dare the intricacies and unknown perils of the wilderness more quickly than she!

Soreness of foot, starvation, the hazard of life or limb among the treacherous rocks, the raving of wild beasts for aught she knew, lay between her and that wretched Greaser town. But freedom beckoned!

At this point her reflections were interrupted by the sound of some one whistling a gay Spanish serenade.

The sound came from a little way down the descent for which her feet were just then winging themselves!

CHAPTER XVII.

A HUMILIATING EXACTION.

WITH a sinking of the heart like lead, Maude turned and walked slowly back to the huts. It

was not necessary that she should see her jailer. He had delicately warned her of his vigilance.

At noon Sancho reappeared, with the dust and weariness of travel on him. He did the honors of his frugal table not without a certain wild grace. After the meal he turned to the business which Maude had been awaiting with scarcely concealed impatience.

"I am just returned from San Hernandez," he announced; when, before he could proceed, Maude broke in:

"I understood you to say that you dared not go to San Hernandez!"

"Dare!" repeated Sancho, with a lift of the eyebrows.

Then, bowing and smiling suavely:

"It is one thing to dare alone, and quite another to escort a lady to the headquarters of the enemy's stronghold. We have no armistices in these degenerate days. You force me to acknowledge that I condescended to a disguise!"

At another time Maude might have laughed at this affectation, but it was the bitterest kind of sarcasm to her in her present situation.

"Great things have come to light in San Hernandez," he pursued. "The gossips are in ecstasies of delight or rage, according as you agree or disagree with them in opinion."

"Of the thousand busybodies, male and female, three hundred stand firm in the position that your rival in the dance was none other than the *Senorita Francisca Monteiro da Rocha* herself, no matter how the great ones strive to repress the truth. They call all the saints to witness that no one but she could execute the dance with which—"

But here the gallant Sancho ran unawares against a snag! Politeness forbade that he conclude—"with which she bore off the palm!" So, with a cough and an apologetic bow, he substituted:

"With which she last favored us."

"Three hundred swear by their hopes of heaven that not Francisca, but—pardon me! I am not with these!—her maid, the coquette Chiquita, was at the fandango. It is alleged—and each and every one of the three hundred calls down a thousand maledictions on her head if she herself was not an eye-witness!—that Chiquita made an assignation with the strange *Americano*, that very morning, at mass; and it is whispered that, on their way to the *casa*, Alverado and his men overtook them, beat the life nearly, if not quite, out of the—"

But here came a startling interruption. Maude sprang to her feet with a scream.

"Charley! Charley! Charley! Oh, they have killed him; and it was I that sent him to his death! I am his murderer! Do you hear? I am his murderer! Oh! oh! oh!"

And wringing her hands, she fell to moaning and sobbing miserably.

"Charley?" repeated Sancho, in puzzled inquiry.

"Charley Osborne," said Maude. "Oh, I shall never forgive myself! Is he dead? Do you know? Have you seen him? Oh, tell me! tell me!"

"Pardon me!—you mistake," answered Sancho. "Not *Senor Osborne*—we shall come to him presently—but—"

"Not Mr. Osborne?" cried Maude, seizing his arms spasmodically, and gazing into his face as if the happiness of her life depended upon his next words.

"Templeton—they called him *Senor Tom Templeton*."

"O-o-o-oh!"

Never was such a sigh of relief.

"But Mr. Osborne?" she went on, anxiously.

"Nothing has happened to him!"

"All in good time!" protested Sancho, as if with the repugnance of a story-teller to have his plot deranged. "Let us first dispose of *Senor Templeton*, already so nearly disposed of by *Saumarez*!"

But his little joke was lost on Maude.

"Poor Tom! poor Tom!" she murmured.

Then, with sudden recollection:

"But Mr. Templeton was not with her! He was with me!"

And with a sudden frown of condemnation, and an accusing finger pointed like a dart:

"It was *you* and your men who fell upon him! If he is dead, you are his murderer!"

Then, breaking down again:

"But, Tom or Charley, in either case it was I that dragged him to his death!"

"I say nothing of myself," remonstrated Sancho, with an air of modest magnanimity under a cloud of false accusation; "but the *senorita* is afflicting herself with needless reproaches. Whether or not the *senorita* is mistaken as to the escort with whom she left the fandango, it is certain that *Senor Templeton* was taken by Alverado's men in company with the *danseuse*, whoever she was, from the *casa*. Besides, though now in some pain, there is no reason why he should not recover. In that event, he may some day assure the *senorita*—"

"Let us waive that point!" said Maude, suddenly bethinking her that if the truth had not yet come to light, there might still be a chance to cover up her tracks. "Go on with your story."

"Let me see!—we were with the three hundred

gossips who swear that Senor Templeton was nearly killed by Alverado, and Chiquita borne back to the *casa*, to a season of penance on bread and water. They all agree that the hussy got off cheaply, without stripes.

"Three hundred more declare that these two factions are both right, and both wrong—in short, that you were Chiquita, and your rival Francisca! The Senors Templeton and Osborne, it is said, are fast friends; and while one took the mistress, the other took the maid! You should see their triumph, on delivering this solution!"

And Sancho laughed as musically as the tenor of an opera.

"The remaining hundred," he pursued—"to them you are indebted for the maintenance of your identity. All the rest belabor these without mercy, for urging the absurd theory that the danseuse who showed her ability to compete with Francisca Monteiro da Rocha, was the Americana who came the day before to San Hernandez in charge of Senor Templeton."

"Perside has betrayed me!" cried Maude.

"You wrong an angel without a spot of guile on her white wings!" declared Perside's lover, gallantly. "To her such baseness were impossible."

"But what more natural than that, himself escorting another, Senor Templeton should assign the lady in his charge to his friend?"

"Very well! We have now come to Mr. Osborne. What of him?"

"An as yet unexplained act of his is urged by the last party in support of their position."

"What act?" cried Maude, alarmed at the possibility that Charley had discovered her.

"He has disappeared."

"Disappeared? He is your prisoner!"

"It is the gossip of San Hernandez that he has—that you have—"

"What? What?"

"Eloped with him."

"Eloped with him! Eloped with Mr. Osborne?"

"The sudden disappearance of both—you see? It is claimed that your superb dancing made conquest of him, as of all others who were privileged to witness it; and that he secured you while he had you. Nobody blames him—many envy him!"

"He is your prisoner!" repeated Maude, trembling with emotion.

Suppose he was near her, there, in that bandit's stronghold! Would Sancho bring them together? Would she have to face him, in broad daylight, and with that convicting dress on?

She would die of shame! But if he fell at her feet, and repeated his passionate protestations of the night before, there was chance of her recovery!

"If so," replied Sancho, "you need be under no apprehensions for his safety. As the lover of Perside, I would have fed his body to the coyotes!"

And there was a momentary flash in the bandit's eyes that made his words probable.

"As your lover—"

And he shrugged his shoulder in token of his indifference.

"But," he went on, "I have come to you to confirm the rumor of your elopement."

"But I have not eloped!" cried Maude, in indignant surprise.

"Nevertheless, it will serve me if it is made to so appear for the present."

"And you propose to sacrifice my womanly dignity to your self-interest? What would Mr. Osborne think of me, if I should give countenance to such a—such a—Nonsense! You must be insane!"

But Sancho soon showed her that there was at least a method in his madness.

Having procured a pen and paper, he went on:

"What I wish of you, is a line to Mr. Templeton, to the effect that you desire him to make no stir about your disappearance, as you are under the protection of Mr. Charles Osborne."

"Impossible! Absurd!" cried Maude, springing to her feet.

But Sancho smiled imperturbably.

"Nothing easier," he maintained. "Besides, it is absolutely necessary."

"But I refuse! I would not do such a thing to save my life! Do you suppose I have no self-respect?"

Not stopping to debate that question, Sancho answered as softly as the greatest carpet-knight of them all:

"I will leave the senorita a moment to reconsider her determination."

And rising, he prepared to bow himself out of her presence.

"You need waste no time over this matter!" Maude called after him. "I will never do it! Who ever heard of anything so monstrous!"

Nevertheless, Sancho proceeded in his own way.

Left alone, Maude stood with clinched hands, set teeth, and blazing eyes. But after a moment so, she suddenly cast herself upon the settle in a burst of enraged tears.

"He! he! he!" giggled Mother Maldito softly, whom she had quite forgotten.

The girl sprang up, furious.

But Mother Maldito was quite invulnerable to

indignant frowns, and she believed herself quite equal to an attempt at physical chastisement.

"You'll do it!" she predicted, bobbing her head confidently. "They always do, in the end."

"But I will not!" affirmed Maude, so stoutly, that it appeared as if she were trying to brace herself against any inducement that the bandit chief might bring to bear.

"Sancho fetches 'em!" chuckled Mother Maldito.

Ten terrible minutes passed, and then Sancho reappeared, hat in hand.

"I await the senorita's compliance," he said politely.

"You may continue to wait!" cried Maude.

"You have fully resolved?"

"I will die before I will so humiliate myself!"

"Let us waive the letter for the present. Though"—and he hesitated, as if loth to take her at her word—"I should prefer—"

"There is not any use in talking about it!"

"Very well! I then beg your attendance."

And taking up her hat, he handed it to her with a bow.

"Where do you wish to take me?" she demanded, shrinking from accepting the hat.

"It is but a step. You will soon know."

"Into the presence of Mr. Osborne?"

"The senorita forgets that she is my guest. Will she permit me no little surprises?"

Maude reflected. Sooner or later she would have to face Charley. She might as well do it at once. And, on second thought, this might not be so bad after all. It might bring their relations to a climax. If Charley really cared for her, he would probably declare himself, and bid her write the letter, which he would afterward make good. In any event, he would know that she was acting under duress.

"Very well!" she said, putting on her hat.

"The senorita confers an inestimable honor upon the humblest of her admirers!" said Sancho, offering her his arm.

As they left the hut, Mother Maldito chuckled; "He! he! he! The commandant always fetches 'em!"

Sancho proceeded toward the largest of the huts, where his men seemed to be indulging in an after-dinner revel, judging from the sounds that issued from the open windows.

Some one was singing a roistering bacchanal, in the chorus of which all joined at the top of their lungs.

Besides this, there was dancing and shouts, some of drunken jollity, some of equally drunken contentiousness.

The door of this hut Sancho opened and ushered his companion into a scene from which she might well shrink with loathing and fear.

Nevertheless, he drew her in and closed the door behind them.

At once the bandits stopped in their debauch and stared at the intruders.

Some showed a disposition to display the usual deference to their chief, but some appeared to regard this as an unwarranted trespass upon their hour of liberty.

"My men," cried Sancho, "here is a prisoner who is no longer serviceable to me. I therefore turn her over to you. Make such disposal of her as you please."

And with a bow, he dropped Maude's hand from his arm, and backed away to make his exit.

"What!" cried the girl, in amazement.

"Senorita, a Dios!"

"But where is Mr. Osborne?" exclaimed Maude, the conviction that she was to meet him being so strong that she did not yet quite realize Sancho's atrocious purpose.

The suave bandit only shrugged his shoulders, and repeated:

"A Dios!"

"Stop, stop!" cried the now thoroughly terrified girl.

But, still smiling, Sancho passed through the door, and closed it almost upon her fingers.

In wild despair she threw herself against it, trying to tear it open. It resisted her efforts.

Then a rising murmur drew her attention toward the other occupants of the room, and she faced about at bay.

At first the men seemed stupefied. Then their eyes began to gleam, and their faces to assume grimaces that might well curdle the blood of the helpless woman shut up there at their mercy, like a fawn in a den of wolves.

They arose and advanced toward her, gazing at her curiously.

She shrunk into a corner, and there stood with drawn revolver, on the verge of suicide.

One of the men sprang before the rest.

"Hold on, boys," he said. "I'm the lieutenant of this band. I come before any of you. She belongs to me, the Cap being through with her."

But to this the men demurred. She had been given to them without distinction of rank. The only fair thing was to cast lots for her.

But the lieutenant would not listen to this. For the enforcement of his prerogative he drew his revolvers.

In an instant weapons leaped into view on every hand. The brigands were in open revolt,

And the poor victim of this villainous rabble, who was about to be fought for, looked about in despair for some avenue of escape.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PERPLEXED DUENNA.

WHEN Chiquita returned to her mistress's room, after her second attempt to protect her mistress by deceiving the old Don, she found Francisca with her face to the wall, and Benita standing staring suspiciously at a wet spot on the floor.

"What is this?" demanded the duenna. "The floor is wet!"

And stooping with no slight difficulty, because of her superabundant flesh and stiff joints, she passed her hand over the matting.

"I suppose there have been no overturned water-jars before to-night!" remarked Chiquita, with outward scorn, though inward uneasiness.

"Doubtless, when one is in a great hurry!" retorted Benita, significantly. "And there have been little liars, in my time!"

"In your time? Oh, yes!" assented Chiquita, quickly.

"Vixen!" snapped the duenna. "But your water-jar is a magician's hat! Do you conjure these dainties out of it?"

Her stooping posture had enabled the speaker's eye to range under the end of the sofa; and as the result of this reconnaissance, she now drew forth in triumph one of the gay silk slippers that Francisca had worn to the fandango.

Alas! in the hurry and darkness this tell-tale had been kicked under the sofa and overlooked.

"I will tear a handful of hair out of my stupid head for that!" Chiquita promised herself, in disgust. "There never was such luck! How many times must we be just out of the scrape, only to have some tormenting little thing plunge us back into it?"

A rustle of the bed-clothes, and a gasping sigh told her that Francisca had turned over, to stare with eyes wide with dismay.

Making a cautionary signal with her hand behind her, the little maid sprang bravely to the defense of her guns.

"A slipper!" she said, with unaffected carelessness. "You can find the mate to it in the closet, without any conjuring!"

"I will look!" replied Benita, coolly.

And she set out for the recommended press, carrying the trophy with her.

"Meanwhile," she observed, holding it up to view, and letting her evil eye seek Francisca's face, though she yet pretended to address Chiquita, "you have a very expeditious way of removing slippers, not in vogue when I was of your age, my dear!"

"It is so long ago, the fashions have changed many times!" sneered Chiquita.

"But how long has it been the fashion to cut lacings, instead of stopping to unloosen them?"

"Since old witches took to venting their malice by drawing bows into hard knots, I suppose."

Here the duenna threw open the closet door with an exultant swing, but discovered nothing to justify her suspicions.

"Leaving you to your slipper-hunt," said Chiquita, with an affected yawn, "I, with your permission, ma'am—will go back to bed."

But the duenna was not to be thrown off the scent by this bravado.

"Do not let me keep you up, if you have no curiosity," answered Benita; "but I am going to look in this wardrobe, and afterward in the drawers of the dressing-bureau."

"Luck to you!" replied Chiquita, fighting her forlorn hope to the very last.

But a tremulous murmur from Francisca caused the duenna to pass the wardrobe, and essay the dressing-bureau at once.

"So!" she cried, in triumph, as she brought to view a treasure-trove of finery, bundled helter-skelter into this receptacle.

With a moan, Francisca hid her face in her pillow.

"What have you to say to this?" demanded Benita, still addressing Chiquita, and pretending not to observe her mistress's agitation.

"What I have already said to my master and yours, that I have had a delightful evening at the fandango!" cried Chiquita, standing with head erect and arms akimbo with defiance.

"You avow it!" exclaimed Benita.

"Oh, Chiquita!" murmured Francisca.

"Having taken the wind out of your sails, by depriving your malice of the delight of bearing tales!" snapped the little maid.

"Liar!" ejaculated Benita. "You have not dared to tell him!"

"Where have I been, while you were nosing about in search of water and shoes, old ferret?" demanded Chiquita.

"And you told him?" murmured Francisca.

"Everything!" affirmed Chiquita. "And did you suppose that, when, having discovered me coming in, you had the goodness of heart

not to betray me, I would be so base as to leave him to suppose that you were my abettor from the first?"

The little maid carried off her part with imitable skill; but Francisca was not equal to such effrontery. She dropped her face into the pillow again.

Looking from one to the other with all her wicked old soul in her gimlet-like glances, Benita read the situation accurately.

"Little liar!" she muttered, recurring to her favorite charge.

And turning, she began to draw the articles of clothing one by one out of their hiding-place.

"Ho—ho! ho—ho!" she chuckled, as she unearthed revelation after revelation. "You must have fallen into the water-jar, little gad-about! Did you come in at the window?"

"Mother of God! what is this? A ladder!—a rope-ladder!"

And as she drew this to light, the old duenna looked as if she were threatened with apoplexy.

Panting asthmatically, she stared from the ladder to Chiquita, and from Chiquita back to the ladder; then at Francisca, and again at the ladder.

"Did not Juliet have a convenience of that sort?" asked Chiquita, with cool effrontery, though, truth to tell, her heart was now beating a reveille.

Francisca only buried her face the more desperately in the pillow, essaying to even stop her ears with it, yet forced to free them again to listen for further developments.

Benita resumed her examination of the drawer.

"But even Juliet," she insisted, sarcastically, "did not wear two costumes at the same ball!"

This brought Francisca out of bed at a bound.

"Ah, Benita! dear Benita! you cannot be so cruel!" she cried, extending her hands in supplication, and almost going down on her knees to the malicious old woman.

"To her?" exclaimed Chiquita, with burning indignation.

And seizing her mistress about the waist, she fairly whirled her away.

"Never!—to such a wretch as she! What can she do? Nothing! We defy her!"

"Chiquita! Chiquita! Do not listen to her, Benita! But you cannot have the heart to betray—"

"Tush! Not she!" cried Chiquita, positively. "Old long nose! you have found us out! Old serpent tongue! why don't you run and contradict what I said to our master?"

And holding her night-dress away on either side with the tips of her fingers, the little maid swept a mock bow to the duenna.

"Run! run!" she urged, tauntingly.

Francisca was in despair. Surely nothing would placate the duenna after such wanton insults. Her face was now purple, and now the color of putty, as she stared at her tormentor, choking with rage.

It seemed that if, now that all was lost, the little maid was resolved to have what satisfaction could be got out of round abuse.

"Ho! ho!" she persisted, "your dropsical old legs are not so limber as your wicked old tongue; or you would be half-way to the master by this time. But then, neither are your wits so sharp as your nose; so let me tell you what to say when you get there."

"Tell the commandant that it has just dawned upon you that you are a superannuated old good-for-nothing that ought to be turned out to grass!—that you have discovered that you are growing deaf and blind and stupid, so that love-trysts are made under your very nose, and your charge practices nocturnal gymnastics on rope-ladders while you—old lynx-eyes!—are asleep! He, depend upon it, will express his signal gratification at the way in which you have acquitted yourself of your trust. He will tell you that that is what he feeds you and clothes you and gives you house-room for—my faith! to render symphonies and oratorios through the nose while his daughter is amusing herself at fandangoes! Ha! ha! ha!"

"But he may add that, having fattened you so long in this pasture, you cannot blame him for politely inviting you to give place to a younger woman."

"In that event, I will take it as a personal favor, if you will recommend my mother as your successor. There is already some thought of her, I am led to understand."

This "understanding" was entirely confined to Miss Chiquita's prolific imagination; but the shot went home nevertheless.

The duenna had long harbored a bitter jealousy, based on the fear that Chiquita's mother was seeking to ingratiate herself into favor, with a view to supplanting her in a position which had many advantages to offset the one vexation of the saucy little maid.

Now she dropped into a chair, panting and almost suffocating with rage and fear.

Albeit not so apt at this sort of sparring match as her maid, Francisca knew enough of her own sex to see that the duenna was now thoroughly vanquished. It only remained to

salve her vanity by letting her march out with her colors flying, so to speak—to enact a little comedy in which it should appear that the duenna yielded through her affection for her charge, though justly incensed by the insolence of the little maid.

So, assuming an air of dignified reproof justified by her position as mistress, Francisca commanded:

"Chiquita, stop! Not another word! Have you no respect for those set over you; even if you are without gratitude or affection for one to whom you, as well as I, are indebted for much good advice and salutary correction?"

Chiquita shrugged her shoulders, as if to intimate that she had small thanks for either advice or correction; but her mistress went on with increased severity:

"I am greatly displeased with you!"

And taking the little maid by the shoulders, she marched her out of the room into her own chamber, and closed the door upon her.

Returning, Francisca threw herself on her knees beside the duenna, and twined her arms about her by no means elegant form.

"Don't listen to her, Benita!" she urged.

"She is often trying to me. But she don't mean half that she says. It is nonsense about her mother. You know her as well as I do. She is well enough in her way; but no one would think of her filling the place of the dearest old duenna that ever had a naughty girl to try her patience and make her trouble in every imaginable way! And you know that my father, though justly offended with me, yet loves me well enough not to give me another duenna, if I plead for you and exonerate you in every way. Of course I know how very, very wicked I have been, and am willing to make any promises for the future."

There was a very cunning blending of considerations in this speech; but Francisca was not so entirely free from guile as to be oblivious to the advantage of having her *gouvernante* feel that her good-word was worth something.

The duenna, on her part, proved herself an arrant old hypocrite; for while she secretly longed to pull Francisca's hair, she instead wound her arm about the girl's neck, and pressing her cheek down upon her head, fell to crying over her in the most broken-hearted fashion.

"Is it I?" she sobbed, "or anything that little vixen could say to wound my feelings? Oh, no! But you, my dearest!—you whom I have loved as if you were my own!—you of whom I have been so proud! To think that you should so disgrace yourself forever! Ah! what have I done, in what has all of my teaching failed, that this should come upon me at last?"

"What man of honor will be willing to marry you now? Men are so censorious, if we poor women make but the least slip! Has my yoke been so burdensome to you? Why, but for this? Could you think that I would wantonly deprive you of innocent pleasure? Oh, my poor deluded little lamb!"

"Now your cousin will make a thousand polite excuses, through which his real meaning will stare like an ass's head through the stable window. Can the commandant endure such an insult? It will lead to the *duello*; and who can tell, if not to the death of your father—for Senor Alverado has no equal, unless in the commandant, with the sword!"

"Ah! do you think that?" cried Francisca, starting up in terror. "I my dear father's murderess! Oh, that a moment's happiness should breed a lifetime of unavailing misery!"

And the girl, quite frightened out of her own little comedy by the duenna's superior acting, wrung her hands in despair.

Benita, having made her point, next proceeded to soothe the tempest of feeling she had raised.

"Hush! hush, my beloved! If—as that hussy of a Chiquita implied—it is suspected only that it was one of you, and it is not known positively which, the evil may yet be avoided. Since she is so eager to claim the exploit, we have but to leave her the credit of it. No one has any special interest in such a worthless baggage; and the punishment she will get for it will be richly deserved on many another score, if not that."

"The principal thing is, that you were in masks, so that no one could be sure of you?"

"Oh, in masks, of course!" cried Francisca.

"I could not have faced them without!"

"Then it is necessary only that you keep your own counsel. I will prevent another inquisition by your father; and I will myself see Senor Alverado. I fancy I can convince him of his mistake."

"But if he is minded to give me up," pleaded poor Francisca, eagerly, "pray do not seek to dissuade him!"

"And leave him to an altercation with your father?"

"Oh!"

"And now to bed!" said the duenna, kissing her charge. "I forgive you freely for this offense, because you have already been severely punished; and then I have no doubt that you did not realize the serious consequences likely to flow from such imprudence, and was over-persuaded by that gad-about, Chiquita! But in

future, you must be guided by the wisdom of your elders."

"Oh, I will! I will!" promised, Francisca, earnestly.

But the little maid, watching and listening through the crack of the door, winked very hard, remarking to herself, philosophically:

"Angels or demons, what liars we all are, to be sure! Of those two, each believes that she has humbugged the other, and yet both know that it is a solemn farce all around! What a capital world this is for laughter, if one is neither old nor ugly!"

And she, being neither, had a good laugh all to herself.

However she scuttled off to bed, so that when the duenna, who shared the room with her, came in she found nothing to keep her from immediate retirement.

The effects of the drug had not been dissipated; so that the duenna's head had scarcely touched the pillow when she was snoring as rhythmically as ever.

Then the little maid hopped out of bed as lightly as a cat, and ran into her mistress's room.

She found Francisca, wide awake, of course.

"Come!" she cried, with a giggle, "the night is not half out! That fandango wasn't a circumstance to our next naughtiness!"

"Oh, Chiquita! what now? I shall never forgive myself—"

"For having secured a lover to your mind—unless, perhaps, you have regrets for Alver—"

Francisca interrupted with a shudder of disgust.

"Well!" cried the little maid, with a fine flash of her black eyes, "if I had such a half-hearted sweetheart as some one that shall be nameless, I wouldn't break my neck running after her, I promise you!"

"But I?—have not I already done more than was maidenly?"

"Oh! it's maidenly, for that matter," scoffed the little maid, "to allow yourself to be married to Bluebeard! But it's not to my taste!"

"Well, then, what next?" asked Francisca, laughing in spite of herself. "What can you have running in your naughty little head now?"

"What next?" repeated Chiquita. "Why, to release the prisoner, to be sure?"

"The prisoner?" gasped Francisca.

"Of course," assented Chiquita. "Would he leave you to languish in a dungeon, when he could get you out just as well as not? I should like to see them shut up Gomez!"

And the little maid drew up her figure with that strut peculiar to all bantams.

"But then, to be sure," she added, quickly modifying her championship of her lover's cause, "that scapegrace might deserve it, so that I myself would say, Make it bread and water in addition, for the good of his soul!"

"But Senor Templeton?" urged Francisca, in her distress now slipping out of bed and taking hold of the little maid.

"What a miserable little wretch I am, coming in here to disturb your peace with my chatter!" cried Chiquita. "Now, but for me, I have no doubt you would have slept on it!"

With her, love-making was the one important business of life, and she resented anything like disloyalty or indifferentism. To be in Francisca's place would have been to her a pure delight. For love's sweet sake she would have done battle with all comers, and neither eaten nor slept till she had circumvented her enemies.

"Oh, but you know that I could not have slept!" sighed Francisca, blushing as if she had proved unworthy of the bitter-sweet blessing that had come to her.

"Well, then," insisted Chiquita, sharply, "will you lie cozily in a bed of down, while he groans on rushes—if indeed he has so much as that between his aching bones and the wet stone floor of his dungeon. I?—I would have strewn my bed with nettles, so that I should never know a moment's peace till he was free!"

"On the stone floor, Chiquita?" panted Francisca, her eyes dilating.

"On the stone floor!" mimicked the little maid. "And do you fancy that they have rugs and divans in prison?"

"But I know nothing of prisons!"

"Now," cried Chiquita, between incredulity and suspicion that her words might yet be true, "I will wager my next silk handkerchief against a bent hair-pin, that you have never seen the miserable hole where they put the poor fellows, when some overseer is grouchy with a headache from too much aguardiant the night before!"

"Never!" answered Francisca.

"Then you shall know more about it before morning!"

"Oh, Chiquita! My father would never forgive me!"

"No doubt! But your lover would adore you!"

And it was plain that to the little maid this argument admitted of no answer.

"But," still urged Francisca, trembling with excitement, "it were impossible, even if we dared!"

"Nothing is impossible!" affirmed the little maid, stoutly. "It is only a question of how much you love!"

"I would give my life!" pleaded Francisca, humbly.

"Nothing so cheap!" declared Chiquita. "Everybody is ready to do that—in words! But will you risk a good scolding?"

"Look you!" she cried, with kindling enthusiasm. "I, who have no interest in this—save some slight love that I bear you, to be sure, and that I do not like to see such a handsome fellow with his two feet tied up before him, so that he has no amusement but counting his toes—I—what am I risking, if they find out that I have persuaded you to this and the other?"

"To be sure," she added, with mock modesty. "I don't like, ordinarily, to air my virtues like this, but that you force me to it."

"But there must be locks on prisons," urged Francisca.

"At which love laughs! You must have heard of that before."

"But what good is all your laughter, when you haven't the key?"

"Oh! even love is not so stupid as to laugh unless he has the key, or some other that answers as well."

"In this case?"

"Gomez is the key—and I have him in my pocket!"

And the little maid chuckled gleefully at her joke.

"Gomez!" cried Francisca.

"Gomez can do anything!" cried Chiquita, proudly—"anything," she added, quickly, "but climb rope-ladders!"

And she laughed till Francisca seized her, crying:

"Hush! hush! you will wake Benita!"

"That pig? Listen to her! Or, better yet, listen to me!"

"In the first place, it will be absolutely necessary to take Gomez into our confidence. If I go to him and tell him that I have been flirting with this stranger, and that I wish to hold an interview with him, even Gomez is not such a fool, or so much in love with me—which amounts to pretty much the same thing—as to let me do it. But anything short of that I can wheedle him into, trust me! It remains, then, for us to get into our clothes as quickly as possible, and away to Gomez! I will go first, and prepare the way for you."

Overcoming every fear and scruple of the trembling Francisca, Chiquita dressed herself in a twinkling, and then got her mistress into the most bewitching *neglige* toilet that ever charmed a lover's eye. For, whatever the business in hand our little coquette never forgot that it is woman's first duty to be pretty.

Then she stole out into the darkened corridor, leaving Francisca wringing her hands with nervous suspense, between tears and prayers for forgiveness.

CHAPTER XIX.

GOMEZ.

THE lover of the little maid deserves a word of introduction, before he is compelled to pass in critical review before the reader.

There was nothing heroic about Gomez. Besides his devotion to cigarettes and gambling, and his fondness for lolling idly in the sun, he had no interest save his patient endurance of the whims of Miss Chiquita.

He was not good-looking; he was neither witty nor wise; he did not know a love-song from a solemn recitative of the liturgy; and as for dancing, whenever he attempted it his sweet-heart always begged him to stop before he killed her with laughter.

Then what did our gay coquette find to love in this happy-go-lucky fellow, who was plainly destined to set no rivers afire?

Mysterious is the heart of woman! Aside from the fact that he displayed an un-Greaser-like invulnerability to the green-eyed monster, Chiquita would have been at a loss to show any cause for her infatuation.

She had begun by making sport of him. It would be rare fun to drag him a captive at her chariot-wheel, and make him the butt of her wit.

Well, she had no difficulty in bringing him to declare himself; but instead of talking more or less idiotically about love, he discoursed of marriage in a quiet, business-like tone that nettled her.

"It is a drudge he wants!" she cried to herself. "I believe the stupid fellow has never once looked at my eyes, and would not be surprised if told that they were pink."

So she laughed in his face; and he—he shrugged his shoulders unmoved.

"If you should chance to change your mind," he said, rolling a cigarette to a nicety, "the commandant will make us as comfortable as soul could wish. He thinks me a good fellow—as you might find me, if you should chance to change your mind."

"Comfort!" she scoffed. "And don't you think I have all the comfort I want, as I am?"

"Who knows!" he ejaculated, with a shrug; and went off apparently quite content.

After that, she set herself to rouse in him what she held to be the ordinary feelings of a man. But when she threw her fascinations about him,

he took it all as a matter-of-course; and when she chose to beam upon another, he revenged himself only by getting his rival drunk and winning his money.

"It is because he has no claim upon me," she said to herself, at last, with more petulance than she would have liked to admit. "I should have engaged myself to him, and then led him a dance!"

Whereupon she became very gracious, till Gomez broached the subject again, not renewing his proposal in due form, but taking it for granted that she had come to his way of thinking, and asking her if she had made up her mind as to setting the wedding day.

Strongly tempted to slap his face for this cool appropriation of her, she however restrained the impulse, only resolving to pay him off for old and new when she had his heart securely in her remorseless little grip.

So she sighed, and blushed, and hung her head, and trembled most bewitchingly, so that no lover but Gomez could have kept his hands off of her a moment. Yet he displayed so little of the ordinary lover's impetuosity, that she was forced to take the initiative, and sink into his arms, scarce invited.

"The stock! the stone!" she cried within her indignant heart. "Am I a hideous old maid, that I must woo him? What a fool I am, to waste my time on such a lizard! He has not the flesh and blood of a man, but the cold sliminess of a frog! But I will find the sensitive quick in him, or know the reason why!"

But her little clinched teeth were suddenly relaxed by a startling discovery. Gomez proved to be not the stock or stone she had imagined.

However he was very temperate in his demonstrations; and after one moment in which he frightened her with the thought that she had wholly misconceived him, he relapsed into his wonted comfortable self-complacency.

After that interview Miss Chiquita had moments of exultation, with all of the malicious instincts of a born coquette on the *qui vive*, as she told herself that she had power to wring his heart under his mask of stolid indifference. But there were, too, moments of vague misgiving, in which the memory of her one momentary glimpse of the inner man set her own heart to beating wildly.

Had she come off scathless? Suppose he should turn the tables upon her? Who then would be the sufferer?

At the thought, only half confessed, of her own vulnerability to the shafts of love, the coquette rebelled furiously. And forthwith she proceeded to brave her fate, flirting more desperately than ever.

Gomez took this so coolly, that in a sudden burst of rage she flashed upon him the charge that he did not love her.

"Suppose I was your wife!" she cried, trembling with a sense of powerlessness either to cast him off or to win him to the passion that she now longed for. "Might I yet have stolen interviews with any gallant that proved more appreciative than you?"

"Well," replied Gomez, rolling a cigarette reflectively, "marriage makes a difference. Before marriage you are free—why not? But after marriage—"

He paused, still rolling the cigarette; but presently turned his eyes full upon hers, with no intensity of menace in their depths, but rather a dreamy speculation, and with none of the undertones in his voice that one would have expected, completed his sentence:

"I should kill the man."

Thrilled to the heart, the girl bent forward, her lips apart, her bosom fluttering, her soul gazing into his. Then, of a sudden, with a low cry of ecstasy, she flung her arms about his neck, and lay panting and sobbing on his breast.

Gomez stroked her hair, with a quiet tenderness that would have astonished those who knew him best.

But a coquette will be a coquette; and as if to make the most of her season of liberty, Chiquita was gayer than ever, flirting so outrageously that it was openly wondered by her friends if this talk of marriage was not a rather shabby joke on poor Gomez.

"Oh, I shall be married to him!" she insisted. "Why? Because he is not a fool!—like these conceited fellows who are thunderstruck with astonishment and rage if one sees anything in the world to admire but their precious selves!"

And laughingly, with her head canted on one side with a birdlike archness, she danced away, a very elf of mischief.

Without having any serious harm in it, the little maid's head was full of sentimental nonsense, in no wise corrected by her habit of poring over old Spanish romances, full of love intrigue, with a rapt credulity which left her sighing for the glory that had faded out of the world, since love-making was the serious business of life, and men served years for their lady's favor.

As Gomez laughed at the idea of losing sleep and risking broken bones on the strength of her ladder, for a whispered interview in the dead of night through her window, with Benita snoring near enough to reach out, did she chance to

wake, and snatch him baldheaded, when he had but to wait for good honest daylight to chat with her without restraint as long as he pleased, or rather as long as she was gracious enough to permit—since Gomez laughed at this as child's-play, Chiquita reversed the situation; and many a time, when everybody supposed her fast asleep, had she stolen through the darkened house, with her heart in her mouth at every startling sound, for a forbidden moment with her lover, whom her imagination strove in every way to invest with some heroic attributes.

These interviews had been at times when the alcalde held some prisoner whom he did not trust wholly to the keeping of bolts and bars, but left his warden, Gomez, to watch as well.

So thus the little maid now came upon him, while the time by studying up some new manipulation of the cards, which would enable him to transfer the *pesos* from his neighbor's pocket to his own with some appearance of lawfulness.

She stole upon him so softly that he had no warning of her vicinity till her delicate fingers pressed down his eyelids from behind.

He did not drop his cards and seize her hands with the eager delight of the lovers in her favorite romances. He only pronounced her name with a tenderness so grave that its true character would have been lost upon any but a finely strung ear:

"Chiquita!"

"A famous sentinel you!" she cried, banteringly. "I could have taken you as the Philistines took Samson in his sleep!"

"Waking or sleeping, I am yours," replied Gomez. "Then why should I guard against you?"

"You were not expecting me?" she said a little wistfully.

For, in spite of all her gay badinage, the times were becoming more and more frequent when the longing came upon her to draw out the hidden feelings of this stolid lover of hers, so strangely different from herself.

He looked at her with a quizzical smile in the depths of his eyes.

"Yes, I had thought of that too," he answered, slowly, after a pause.

"But you did not wish it?" she persisted.

"Does your father confessor wish it, when you go to him?" he asked.

"Hey! We have a new wit!" she cried, arching her brows in surprise at this, almost the first suspicion of humor she had ever discovered in him.

"Oh, I demand nothing! I have sins enough of my own," replied Gomez, with a shrug; and returned to the shuffling of his cards.

With a burst of petulance Chiquita struck them from his hands, sending them fluttering all over the corridor.

"If we are to be man and wife, it would be a pity that one should be more polite than the other!" she said, half in reproof, half in apology.

Quite unmoved, Gomez substituted the rolling of a cigarette, with the assumption that no exception could be taken to this by even the most exacting.

"Well," pursued Chiquita, mockingly, "if I have come to confession, are you ready with absolution, holy father?"

"Padre Bernardo would tell you that absolution is for the truly penitent, and they have repented who have made restitution."

"What! I must give you the kisses of which a saucy fellow has robbed me? Or will you be content with those he left me in exchange?"

"Give me none but your own," replied Gomez, rather dully, his slower wit not readily finding an answer in kind.

"Good!" cried the girl. "I will act on your hint! On our next meeting, I will demand a restoration of my own, and give him his in return. Till then I will do penance, by foregoing the privilege of any such interchange with you!"

"As the abettor of another, I do not hold you so unpardonably guilty," said Gomez, shifting the theme.

"How an abettor?" cried Chiquita, affecting to misunderstand him. "No one abetted me. The commandant has just wrung from me a confession that I stole away to the fandango to meet the gallant you have made such a pother at capturing. As the secret is out, and would come to you anyhow, I may as well tell you that I saw him at mass, and he looked so hopelessly smitten with my beauty, that I took compassion on him, and made an assignation for this evening. Benita will tell you of my dropped handkerchief, which he restored to her with his best bow—ha! ha! ha!—the old shrew never guessing of the note he had abstracted!"

"Well, I went to the fandango—"

"You need not tell me of that."

"Ha! Jealous at last!"

And her eyes danced with delight.

"I was an eye-witness of what occurred," said Gomez, quietly.

"What! you?—at the fandango?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"But I did not see you!"

"You were too much engrossed with—"

But here Gomez broke off, and began again:

"Nevertheless I followed you."

"Impossible! What do you mean?" cried the little maid, leaping to her feet in her excitement.

"What could be more simple? I followed you—"

"From the house?" panted Chiquita.

"From your chamber window."

"And you saw— Mother of God!"

"Both," answered Gomez, bobbing his head as he smoked placidly. "Also your return. You?—you climb like a monkey! But she!"

And Gomez shrugged his shoulders as if in depreciation of Francisca's performance, while he grinned at recollection of Chiquita's agility.

"And you have told the commandant of this!" cried the girl, with clinched teeth and blazing eyes.

"I?" ejaculated Gomez. "Since when have I been one of your blabbers?"

"Ah! my own Gomez, you are a treasure!"

And at a flash she was perched on his knee, with her hands clasped behind his neck. And though she hung back as far away from him as her arms would reach, yet her eyes danced with such grateful appreciation, and her rich lips wore so inviting a smile, that he would have been a wooden man who did not avail himself of his opportunities.

However, she was away again as quickly, even before the return of that cool indifference which began to fill her with tremulous uncertainty as to her real hold on him.

"Well," she said, "I have deceived the commandant; but I came to you intending full confession. And you must join us, Gomez, to help outwit them all?"

"I become a plotter?" cried Gomez—"I, on whose faithfulness my commandant counts as on the course of the sun or the change of the seasons!"

"So much the better!" exclaimed Chiquita. "If you were not trusted, you could not aid us."

Gomez made a wry face.

"He is a prisoner?" pursued Chiquita.

"Tied fast by the two legs!"

"Ah! you brutes! But it will be all the more grateful to him to be released."

"How released?"

"By one who shall be nameless!" whispered Chiquita. "Of course you will know nothing—you, the ever faithful one!"

And she laughed mockingly.

"When the commandant says—Untie him!—he will go free," said Gomez, his tone and manner adding an implication that made Chiquita's eyes flash again.

"We shall not wait for the commandant!" she declared.

"Not to be a bearer of tales—that is one thing!" said Gomez, stolidly. "To betray one's trust—"

And he broke off, leaving her to the most natural inference.

"Listen!" commanded the girl, trembling with anger. "You will take yourself off, forgetting your keys; or, if you prefer, you will sit here asleep, or blind and deaf, so that you know nothing of one who passes you, coming or going. In the morning you will be called to account for your prisoner; you will be imprisoned, beat, maybe! What of that? It is for one who has the right to command you and me! Will you do it? Yes, or no?"

She stood before him with clinched fists, set teeth, and blazing eyes. Every fiber of her quivering little frame told him that, if he failed her, he must bid a final good-by to such hopes as he might have associated with her.

He looked at her, with no corresponding excitement displayed in his face or voice, as he replied:

"Is it their whips that I fear, do you think? Is it imprisonment, starvation?"

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"If that were all, I would not hesitate to gratify your slightest whim!"

"Then why do you refuse?" she panted. "Is it a whim that brings me here, think you?"

"No whim," he admitted. "But the averted eye of my commander!—never to be trusted by him again! He might let me go without a word of reproach. I think he would. He has always held me a good fellow!"

But the girl was not touched—or at least did not let it be seen—by the pathetic modulation of his voice, nor by the wistful appeal of his gaze.

"Ah! what are these," she cried, dismissing them with an impatient wave of her hand, "compared with his life? You know very well that Alverado will kill him, if possible. He would have killed him last night, but for some interference. I know him without stopping to see. What interference was it?"

"I," answered Gomez, modestly dropping his eyes.

"You?"

"I held him."

"You struggled with him, at the risk of his turning and rending you?"

"Need I fear his strength?"

The girl stood silenced a moment. Could she ask this man, who had already braved the rage of one of whom all stood in fear, to go still fur-

ther, and disgrace himself in the eyes of the master whose approbation he prized so highly?

But this check only increased her rebellion.

"Granted that you saved his life! Boast of it, if you will!" she cried, with the gratuitous cruelty in which the gentlest of the sex will indulge on occasion. "But is not she at quits with you? When you were at death's door with the pest, so that every one would have left you to your fate, dreading the contagion, did not she send me to you?"

This was a rather lame argument, but it had the only effect Chiquita aimed at.

Gomez's face softened, and he asked:

"Do you wish this thing, Chiquita?"

"With all my soul!"

"Then it shall be done—for the sake of one who loved me enough to risk her life, even what she prized more, her beauty, and who nursed me so carefully that the good saints heard her prayers, and left me only this remembrance of her devotion."

He lifted his hand and tenderly touched his temple, where a single small-pox pit marked his otherwise scarless face.

The girl laughed hysterically, to disguise the emotion his words and manner had awakened.

"Oh, nothing could be more selfish!" she affirmed. "Was it not bad enough to have a homely man about me all my life? I could not have endured to have you hideous!"

"Look you!" he said, drawing forth a small pocket mirror. "I am not a vain man; yet I keep this glass—to bring that one small spot in view when I am alone. I have wished that it might have been on my hand, or better yet, on my arm, where no one could see it, and yet where it might be within reach of my lips!"

By this the girl was shaken into tears, and with her arms about his neck kissed the spot he loved.

"Ah! do you think, my Gomez, that I have no deeper feeling, because I laugh and am gay? I am so foolish; but—but—I love you too!"

"I would not have you other than you are," he replied, very gently.

Then, with her face still hidden from view, and only the hot touch of her cheek against his and the trembling of her figure betraying her maiden shame:

"But I have teased you so long! Do you—do you—want me—still?"

He put up his hands, and taking her face between them, drew it, in spite of her clinging resistance, round till he could look full into it. Then gazing soul to soul, his grave eyes fascinating her, he said, with an impressiveness that she had never before seen in him:

"When I become necessary to you—when your happiness demands it—when you feel some of the weariness of waiting that has oppressed me—then come to me!"

And she cried impulsively:

"Take me now—now!"

"You wish it?" he asked, his voice for the first time shaken and hoarse with tempestuous feeling.

"Ah! more than I can tell you!" she answered, her eyes revealing what her lips left unexpressed.

He caught her face to his, and held it so for a moment, then quickly put her away, rising to his feet.

"Go now!" he said, turning away, as if ashamed at this outburst.

And she went on flying feet.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WRONG MAN.

WHEN the little maid burst into her mistress's room, she found Francisca on her knees before her *prie-dieu*.

"Everything is arranged," she cried, breathlessly. "Ah, that Gomez! He is an angel in breeches; and if you do not haste, *senorita*, I shall be a matron before you."

She was between tears and laughter, in her hysterical gayety.

Francisca rose from her knees, pale and struggling for breath, as she pressed her hands upon her bosom.

"I am to go to him—at once!" she panted.

"Look you!" cried Chiquita. "What is so selfish as a lover? Here I am the happiest woman in the world, and you do not stop to say—I congratulate you! Since when has happiness ceased to be a novelty worthy of some note?"

"And I owe you so much!" breathed Francisca, apologetically.

"Then listen, and be guided by one who has just sold herself into matrimonial bondage for your sake, and—well, a little out of pity for a poor fellow who is unhappier than I supposed without me."

"He will never be unhappy with you, you dear creature!" cried Francisca, not so much absorbed in her own affair as to be devoid of womanly sympathy with the romantic passion in another.

"Won't he, though?" exclaimed Chiquita. "Am I getting so old and ugly, then, that nobody can be found to risk a stab in the back for a kiss in the dark? There! who so wicked as I? But what would you? One must keep oneself in

request; and blood-letting and love-making have gone hand in hand since the world began!

"But to the duty before you. Understand, you are to turn him out into the night without a moment's delay. Minutes are of golden mint-
age! One may be a life's ransom! And now go, and all propitious angels go with you!"

"Sustain me, Chiquita—you who have such courage!" breathed Francisca, clinging to the little maid. "Ah! I feel my limbs fail me! I can scarce catch breath."

"Stay you here, and I will go in your place," cried Chiquita, indignant at weakness that was next to disloyalty to love—"a place that I would not give up for my life. Ah, if it were not for Gomez! By my faith, I would win him from you."

"Hush, hush!" said Francisca, for they were already at the door.

Then they moved along the darkened corridor till Gomez's light was in sight.

The warden stood beside it, looking as composed as if the punishment were not to fall upon him.

"My good Gomez!" breathed Francisca, taking his hand in both of hers. "How can I ever repay you?"

"The *senorita* forgets that her happiness is my one care," said Gomez, gallantly.

But his little lady-love cut him short.

"Off with you! Are you so much in love with falsehood that you stay to see it all? What can you tell the commandant when he questions you?"

"I have thought of a plan which will leave me in somewhat better case—with your permission."

And he bowed to Francisca.

"If only I could bear your punishment!" sighed the girl.

"The *Americano* shall leave me bound in his place. I must then say that he called me into the cell, I supposing that he was securely bound; but that he had slipped his bonds, and so sprung upon and overpowered me."

A flush of shame mounted to Francisca's forehead. She and hers were profiting by the falsehood of others.

"Deception!" she sighed—"nothing but deception!"

"Oh, in us—that is nothing!" was Chiquita's ready assurance. "What an inconvenience of greatness, not to be permitted to profit by a fib without feeling uncomfortable about it! Why, one is so hampered and hedged about in this life that there is no pleasure to be had without hoodwinking somebody."

But without stopping to canvass the little maid's theory of morals, Francisca turned away, saying only:

"Wait here a moment. I will call you."

And taking Gomez's ponderous bunch of keys, she was moving down the corridor, when Chiquita called after her:

"The light! the light!"

And snatching up the lantern, she was about to run with it to her mistress, when Francisca restrained her.

"Let me go without the light," she said, her face flaming scarlet at the thought of being seen by the man to whom she now felt that she had made unmaidenly advances.

"In the dark!" exclaimed Chiquita to herself. "And so the effect of her prettiest toilet thrown away."

But Francisca had hastened off, every step nearer the cell of her supposed lover making her heart beat more wildly and her limbs the more tremulous.

It was her faltering step that sounded like stealth to Charley Osborne.

She could scarcely turn the key in the lock for the deadly weakness that overcame her. Once within the cell, the darkness and silence frightened her. What if he were dead?

She tried to speak, but the words died on her lips. Almost suffocating, she staggered forward.

It was a lucky chance that saved her from a terrible reception. Charley caught the rustle of her dress.

"Hold! Stand where you are!" he commanded, yet speaking so guardedly that his voice had no distinctive quality. "Is this a woman?"

The moment she heard his voice, a great wave of passionate delight drove every fear and misgiving from Francisca's heart.

"It is I!" she whispered, speaking in English, because she thought it would be sweeter to him.

And with a sob she sunk upon her knees beside him, longing to take his head in her embrace. Only the fear that she had already overstepped the prescribed bounds of maidenly reserve restrained the impulse—luckily for Charley, as it will presently appear.

"Well! well! well! you're a little brick!" cried Osborne, never for a moment dreaming that it was other than the little maid. "But if my arms were free, you shouldn't draw the line at a speaking distance, I promise you!"

Francisca gave a little start. Though she did not understand the English slang, it did not seem quite up to the tone of Tom's usual compliment, to liken her to an adobe. However, she reflected that there is no quarreling with the

idioms of a language; and the prisoner's allusion to his bonds brought her first duty vividly before her.

"I have come to set you free!" she whispered, feeling for the ropes.

"Free!" repeated Charley. "But only to make me a more hopeless captive, in bonds that cannot be so easily broken!"

That was a great improvement over being called a brick; and a gurgling murmur of tenderness was his reward.

"But will you ever forgive me for bringing you into such peril, and this cruel torture?"

"Forgive you, you jolly little angel?" cried Charley. "The question is, will you ever forgive me for the nonsense I was talking to you all the evening?"

"Nonsense!" she repeated after him, with a spasmodic start, recalling the strange coldness of his parting with her, though now he seemed impassioned enough.

"Why, of course I knew that you spoke English!" declared Charley, telling that "whopper" with a glibness that argued much practice in deluding the fair sex. "I was only trying to draw you out. Now, I'll bet you thought I meant all that!"

"What can you mean?" panted Francisca, her hands now so shaken by a nameless terror, that she could scarcely go on with the work of loosening the knots that had held him prisoner.

"Why, you didn't suppose that I really loved anybody else, and told you so to your face?"

"Love another?"

It was the cry of a tigress, not loud, but hoarse with fierceness, at the same time that it was wild with despair.

With a bound, she tore herself away from him.

Charley had never heard anything like this, though it must be confessed that he had given more than one beauty cause to upbraid him.

To Francisca all the world was whirling round. In her passionate heart reigned such wild tumult, that she had not attended to the exact import of his words.

But one thought burned itself, with the touch of a branding-iron, into her tortured brain—unwooded she had bared her heart to him; he had toyed with her for the amusement of the passing moment; now, wearied, he was talking of his love for another.

Nothing so appealed to Charley Osborne as beauty in distress; and he was one of those temporizing people who soothe the present at whatever the cost in the future. So, in a tone of tender expostulation, yet so guardedly that the true quality of his voice was not betrayed, he exclaimed:

"Why, my darling—my pretty dear!"

This was more like Tom; and with a counter-revolution of feeling as sudden as her dismay, Francisca cast herself on her knees again, throwing her arms about him, as she murmured:

"Ah, Tom! Dear, dear Tom! how you frightened me!"

"Tom! Tom!" ejaculated Charley, the truth flashing over him, for in the abandon of her renewed happiness Francisca had spoken aloud, so that he at once recognized her.

He, too, was surprised out of the whisper that had so far disguised their identity, so that the girl knew that this was not the voice of her lover.

"Ah!" she gasped, with a great cry of terror.

And once more tearing herself from him, she sprung blindly toward the door.

To secure a moment shut away from all the world with her lover, she had closed the door after her on entering. Now in her mad panic she sought to tear it open, drawing it toward her, forgetful that it opened outward.

"Help! help!" she cried, beating upon the barrier. "Help! oh, help!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Charley. "My cake's dough! She'll rouse the house. What a fool to give myself away before she had loosened these accursed bonds!"

He struggled savagely to tear himself free, resolved to spring upon the jailer who responded to her summons, and fight his way to liberty.

But the bonds held firm, in spite of his fiercest assaults.

"My dear lady!" he expostulated, at last, be- thinking him of the chance of an appeal to her regard for her lover's friend, if he could but calm her enough to gain a hearing.

But she assailed the door all the more wildly, horrified by the thought of being shut in there with a stranger.

It was lucky for Charley that terror robbed her voice of its wonted ringing sonority, and that the stone corridors of the cellar drank up her hoarse cry.

More went out of doors, through the little grated window near the ceiling of his cell, than up into the house, through the oaken floors.

But Chiquita and Gomez came running up with the lantern, just as Francisca thrust open the door, to fall almost swooning into the little maid's outstretched arms.

"Ah! sweet Mother of Mercy, what is this?" cried Chiquita. "He is dead! Alverado hath slain him!"

But Francisca recovered herself almost instantly.

"Go! go!" she cried, pushing Chiquita back, and seizing the lantern from Gomez's hand.

The change that so suddenly came over her, astonished both her faithful attendants.

The color came back to her cheeks and lips. Her eyes flashed fire. In the place of fear, she was in a fine rage!

Amazed, bewildered, Chiquita and Gomez obeyed her command without having seen what had caused this unaccountable storm of feeling.

Francisca took up the lantern and went back into the cell alone, closing the door behind her.

With much the same disdainful courage that her father had displayed, Francisca walked up to Charley and flashed the light of the lantern over him.

"Who are you?" she demanded, fiercely.

"A poor devil who is doubly your prisoner," trembled on Charley's lips; but remembering that he was talking to his friend's betrothed, he substituted politely, hoping to conciliate her favor by his relationship to her lover:

"The last person in the world of whom you need stand in fear, senorita—the friend of Tom Templeton. May I be permitted to ask if it was for him that you mistook me a moment ago?"

"May you ask?" repeated Francisca, her eyes blazing, her nostrils dilating, her white lips quivering away from her gleaming teeth, the whole producing an expression of ferocity that fairly transformed her countenance without destroying its beauty. "And you, being his friend, have dared to personate him—have dared to betray me into dishonor! Infamous villain, I could drive this poniard to your heart!"

And dropping the lantern so that it rolled neglected on the floor, she plucked a stiletto from her hair, and menaced Charley with it so fiercely that he was well-nigh satisfied that his last moment was at hand.

"Good heavens, madam!" he cried, "what have I done that was not consistent with the profoundest respect? Not to mention my reverence for you, do you suppose that I could betray my friend by indignity to one in whom—pardon me—he is so deeply interested?"

"And it is nothing that you have desecrated my lips by your foul kisses; lips that were dedicate to him—that no man living has ever touched, save only my revered father! It is nothing that you should receive the most sacred outpouring of my soul!"

But sobs choked her, and dropping her face into her hand, she rocked her body to and fro in such anguish and despair as Charley had never before witnessed.

"Ah, I am undone!" she sighed. "Never can I receive his kiss again—I that am befouled! All the waters of the earth cannot wash this stain from my soul—nothing but blood!" she burst forth, with a sudden return to her savage vindictiveness.

Again the maddened woman sprung upon the prostrate prisoner, clutching him by the hair and thrusting his head back, while she poised the poniard above his strained neck.

"Let God avert his face from a murderer!" she cried, hoarsely, "but my lover shall know that I am pure!"

And closing her eyes to shut out the horror of her mad deed, with all the force of a wild despair, she lunged at his throat!

CHAPTER XXI.

A PRISONER STILL.

SOMETIMES our very foibles turn to good account. It was fortunate that Chiquita was a born eavesdropper, though not a malicious one. The knowledge she gained in this way she never betrayed to any one's injury, but on the contrary, often used it for the benefit of those she loved.

Interested in every fiber of her loyal soul in everything that pertained to her mistress, she never missed anything relating to her, if she could help it.

However, this was no reason why she should permit Gomez to share this surreptitious knowledge. So she forced him to respect Francisca's wishes to the letter, while she tiptoed back to the cell door, to watch and listen through the wicket.

She had seen Francisca's parting with Charley in the chaparral, at the time supposing him to be Tom, as Francisca herself did.

Now the whole truth flashed upon her!

How Charley had taken the place of his friend she did not know, but she had not the slightest doubt that it was unintentional, and indeed unconscious until now.

She knew better than any one else the passionate nature of her mistress. She knew that to Francisca love was so sacred, that a kiss other than his to whom she had dedicated her heart was as an infamy of the deepest dye. She knew that the madness of that moment might drive the gentlest of all gracious creatures to an act of desperation all out of keeping with her true nature.

Francisca so quickly gave over her first mad

impulse to wash out, in the blood of the offender, what she believed to be a wanton insult, that Chiquita had no time to interfere.

It was, then, with a view to relieve her mistress of the humiliation that overwhelmed her that the little maid swung open the cell door and slipped in, so that she was just in time to seize Francisca's arm on the recurrence of her frenzy.

"Ah!" she cried, "what are you about to do? Do you not see?—it is a mistake. They have captured my escort, instead of yours! In what has he offended you?"

"Poor fellow! I did not think to bring you to such a pass as this?"

"Your escort!" repeated Francisca, starting back in amazement.

"To be sure," answered the little maid, unblushingly. "Do you not see it is not Senor Tem—"

"Hush!" cried Francisca, with the impulse to hide her love, forgetful that Charley had just implied his knowledge of it.

However, this little word caused Chiquita's heart to leap with satisfaction. It told her that she had shaken Francisca's belief in the identity of the man with whom she had parted in the chaparral.

Charley Osborne had not a doubt that he was now face to face with the little coquette who had run Maude Granville such a hot race in his volatile affections all the evening; so he said, honestly enough:

"Senorita, I hope you will believe that, when you came into my cell, I mistook you for this lady; whom I beg, in her turn, to believe, that it would take more than this little tying up to make me regret the pleasure of having escorted her home."

"Well, you poor boy!" exclaimed Chiquita between laughing and crying, "you shall not stay long in this predicament! We came to release a better man; but finding you, we are no less happy to set you free."

And she quickly and deftly finished the work Francisca had begun.

Charley rose to his feet, and bowing reverentially to Francisca, said:

"Senorita, if I have been captured in the place of my friend—as I cannot now doubt to be the case—I will say that I am heartily rejoiced at his escape, as well as at my own. To you, and to this little lady"—and he looked upon Chiquita with a playful smile that made her wish he had in fact been her escort—"I owe a debt of gratitude which shall not soon be forgotten."

Francisca only stared at him, dumfounded.

Was it true that she could yet lift her lips to her lover's caress without a blush?

It was evident that Charley was perfectly sincere, and Chiquita appeared to do so. Their eyes met, with glances that implied amusing recollections of a desperate flirtation.

Francisca's head was in a whirl. On the one hand was the maddening hope that this might be true; on the other, the teasing recollection that the manner of the man with whom she had parted had seemed unlike that of her lover, and all too fatally like that of the prisoner whom she had so nearly kissed but a moment ago.

Now she sent up a grateful prayer to the Virgin that she had been preserved from this disgrace. She told herself that some subtle instinct of love had restrained her there in the cell, and that the same instinct would have warned her if the man in the chaparral had been other than the lord of her heart. At the same time there was a torturing under-current of feeling that she was trying to hoodwink herself. Why else did the thought come to her, that, if there had been a mistake, her faithful little maid might be the only one in the world, besides herself, who would ever know of it?

"Meanwhile," said the little maid, "we are not holding a level!"

And she quickly ran out for Gomez.

"Come, thou scape-goat!" she said, laughing, "the time waits to tie thee up for the sacrifice!"

Gomez looked docile enough; but Charley demurred.

"What!" he exclaimed, "is this good fellow to be left in my place?"

"Assuredly," answered Gomez. "As I cannot tie myself, and there is some little danger in delay, I beg of you to proceed with all convenient expedition."

"That's all hog-Latin to me!" declared Charley. "What does he say?"

Chiquita translated glibly.

"What a little witch you are!" cried Charley, with a glance that ought to have turned Gomez green with jealousy. "You're handy to have around!"

"Come! come!" cried the conspirator, scarcely able to contain her merriment. "Are you trying to make trouble between my lover and me?"

"Your lover!—he?" exclaimed Charley.

"A better than thou!" declared Chiquita, with spirit. "It's a pity that a less worthy should tie him!"

"Then I'll be beholden to him to put me back!" answered Charley. "Do you think that I am afraid to face these old duffers?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed, bowing apologetically to Francisca.

She flamed scarlet, guessing that he had used a term of disparagement, though she did not understand it.

"Come!" cried Chiquita, seizing his arm, "there is more at stake than a question of generosity between you and Gomez. No serious harm will come to him; but if you stay—"

She shot a quick glance into Charley's eyes, her own for the moment losing their accustomed laughter.

The change was sufficient to cause him to at once forego further hesitancy, and set to binding the substitute with all speed.

His work was scarcely completed, when the ever vigilant *intriguante* suddenly thrust her foot through the lantern, extinguishing the candle, and leaving them all in impenetrable darkness.

"Eh! what now?" demanded Charley.

"Hush!" whispered Chiquita. "Some one is astir without! It is as I feared. Her outcry roused—"

"Do not forget the gag!" pleaded Gomez.

"Gag!" repeated Charley, when this petition was translated to him. "I have no gag."

"True! you do not carry a detective's outfit in your pocket—nor a detective's wits in your head!" sneered the girl.

She wanted to add that even the smallest allowance might have saved them all a lot of trouble; but she contented herself with calling him a "stupid;" and going down on her knees, quickly made a plug of one end of Gomez's scarf, which she fastened securely in his mouth by tying the other back of his neck.

She had the grace to sweeten this unsavory morsel with a kiss and whispered expression of appreciation of his devotion.

Then she stood breathless, holding her mistress with one hand and Charley Osborne with the other, while some one knelt at the little window near the ceiling of the cell, staring blindly into the darkness, and listening.

"It is nothing, Pepe," growled a companion of the investigator, sleepily.

"I heard it distinctly," insisted the man with his face at the window. "It was the outcry of some one in distress."

"But a woman! Pah!"

"A woman! What of that? I tell you, it was a cry for help."

"That devil's-dam, Benita, clapperclawing the little vixen—"

"Who is nothing to you, idiot!" interposed Pepe, with irritation.

"For which I am devoutly thankful to heaven!"

"Ah! the villain!" breathed Chiquita, with playful indignation. "But it only shows that he is sore yet!"

"Come! come!" insisted the grumbler, with a more dismal yawn than before, "if you have the devil for a bedfellow, and prefer to stay out here, don't insist on making sacrifice of the rest of us. My pillow—"

"I will make sure that this fellow is all right first. You yourself saw the light in here."

"It is the arguardiant that got into your head, I tell you, man! You're weak in the upper story, and a little—"

"Hello, prisoner!"

Chiquita squeezed Charley's arm, to warn him against replying.

"He's asleep, where he ought to be!" growled the discontented one. "You'll not be content till you infect every one on the premises with your imps of restlessness!"

"I will see whether Gomez is asleep too! It's a pity that the nights are not twice as long, for the accommodation of you stupid louts!"

"That isn't so bad an idea," replied the other, with the air of a man not easily "sat-down upon—" with a fandango every night!—eh?"

Pepe got up and moved away, followed by his little knot of stable-boys.

"Ah!" breathed the little maid, as if a great weight were suddenly lifted from her breast. "We have not a moment's breathing-spell! They will be in here before we can say an *ave*! Kick off your boots, my grenadier; take them in your hand, and follow me! It will be impossible for you to go out there—"

"Will it, though?" cried Charley, disdainfully—"with only that gang between me and—"

"You want to get shot, and break my heart! Worse!—you are eager to betray us all! Will you be guided by me? Did not you put your foot into this trap the moment you passed from under my care?"

"Lead off! I am with you to the depths of—Ex-cuse me!"

"To the portal of Heaven, you irreverent fellow!"

"Anywhere!"

"Come, then! Here! keep hold of my apron-string!"

"And beauty leads us with a single hair!" quoted Charley, gayly. "It isn't the first time I have been led by an apron-string!"

"I warrant you! But from this moment, not a breath!"

He drew off his boots, and was then led almost at a run through corridors so dark that he could not see his hand before his face.

Nor did his sense of hearing serve him much better, thanks to his want of familiarity with Spanish.

They had scarcely reached the ground floor of the house, when they heard Pepe calling to Gomez below. A breathless scamper along another hall and up a second flight of stairs. Then, at the entrance of what seemed to be another corridor, his guides stopped so abruptly that he ran pell-mell into them.

An agitated whispering ensued, from which he gathered only that Francisca was expostulating and Chiquita insisting.

But we need not labor under his disability.

"In Heaven's name, where are you taking him to?" queried Francisca.

"To the only safe place of hiding," answered the little maid, non-committally.

"But where? where?" insisted Francisca, holding her companion back. "We can go no further in—in—this direction!"

"Save to our rooms."

"What? With a man!—a stranger!"

"A gentleman—a man of discretion—one who will not need to be reminded that conventionalities must yield to necessity."

"You are mad!"

"That he may escape being shot!"

"Better death to him than dishonor to us! If he is the gentleman you take him for, he will be the first to insist upon it."

"But there can be no dishonor unless we are found out—which we will be, if we stand paltering here! Listen!"

"Impossible! impossible!" cried Francisca, wringing her hands in the darkness, in a paroxysm of despair at the multiplying of her perplexities. "Oh, Chiquita! Chiquita! what have you led me into!"

Without stopping for self-exculpation, the little maid continued to urge the present issue.

"Have we not Benita? Is she not protection enough from him, were he the most reckless of gallants, instead of one with the chivalrous instincts of an American of the best sort?"

"Benita!" gasped Francisca, as a bird who was recommended to the protection of a cat.

"Benita!" insisted Chiquita. "She is at our mercy. Now is our chance to pay her up for old and new!"

"Listen! listen, I say!"

A hubbub of voices below showed that Pedro had penetrated to the cell, and discovered Gomez in his mock predicament.

"Are we waiting for your father, or for Alverado?" cried Chiquita. "Hark! Some one is moving on this floor! It is the commandant! In the name of the ever blessed Virgin!"

And overbearing all opposition, Chiquita dragged her mistress and her "grenadier" down the corridor, and into a room the darkness of which left Charley dependent upon his sense of smell for any surmise as to its character.

The faint exhalation of some exquisite perfume suggested that it was the sanctuary of the beautiful creature who was panting and almost sobbing in her distress at his side.

The little maid was right in her estimate of Charley Osborne as a gentleman.

"Senorita," he said, with a respectful deference that could not be mistaken, "I hope you will believe that, if I had guessed where I was being led to, I should not have penetrated here. If it is not now too late to escape without compromising you, show me the nearest way out. A window will serve."

"To make you the hero of a fine scandal!" cried the girl, scornfully. "Stay where you are till I return. Do as I bid you, sir!"

"Remain!" breathed Francisca, burying her face in her hands, even in the darkness.

Charley stood in his tracks, listening to the sounds of the arousing house.

"If they drop in upon me, I haven't a toothpick to defend myself," was his comfortable reflection. "I hope that little witch will be considerate enough not to leave me entirely at their mercy, if her wits fail. By Jove! if she does fail, it will be a pity! She's sharp enough to run a—a—a—well, almost anything!—a steamboat, for instance, or a three-ringed show. At any rate, she'll run that duenna, I'll bet a cooky!"

Meanwhile the maid was shaking Benita into wakefulness by the shoulder.

"Not a word—on your life, not a sound!" she commanded, clapping her hand unceremoniously over the duenna's mouth.

"Eh! eh! what, you little vixen?" sputtered the bedlam, struggling to free herself.

"Get up!" ordered Chiquita. "We're going to have another occupant for this room. Now you might as well make up your mind to behave yourself, and ask no questions. Take my word for it, the less you know, the better you will be off! Remember, you don't want to add to the things that you are afraid to disclose, even in the confessional."

"What is it, Chiquita—what is it, you perverse child? Ah! are you destined to ruin us all?"

Never before had the duenna condescended to such a tone of piteous pleading. It was plain

that she was entirely cowed by the little maid's audacity.

"Come, now! be reasonable," admonished Chiquita. "We are in a terrible scrape—there is no use in denying that. But we sink or swim together. You cannot betray us without running yourself. Be quiet and do as I tell you, till I get everything cleared up; and then we'll start on a new basis; you will treat me as a woman, quite a match for you; and I will behave myself, and not give you any unnecessary trouble."

So she led the now docile duenna into Francisca's room, seating her in a corner, with instructions not to interfere by word or movement, whatever she might hear or suspect.

Then back to the boudoir, where she groped till she laid hold of her waiting grenadier.

"What a lot of puppets you are!" she laughed. "It is now your turn to have the string pulled that sets you in motion."

The trembling duenna heard his stealthy tread as he passed her, and a faint odor of tobacco-smoke told her that her worst fears were realized, and she utterly helpless to stay the course of events.

"There! You can sit here in the dark and twiddle your thumbs, or reflect on your sins, or what you will for amusement!" said the little maid.

Then she flitted away and the door was closed and locked upon him.

"A prisoner still, more of a prisoner than ever, I'm half afraid!" sighed Charley. "What a situation for a doctor, with a patient on his hands who requires four calls a day."

Then, half-soberly:

"Do I love her still; or has this little midge bewitched me? She dances like an angel—there is no getting around that—and I dote on dancing."

"Meanwhile, my chances of being a corpse are better than of being a bridegroom!"

But his fears, if he really entertained them, were destined to a happy disappointment. The house was roused over the escape of the prisoner, but no one dreamed of looking for him where he was so cozily ensconced. Look for a live man harbored under the wing of that dragon, Benita? That were midsummer madness!

When Pepe had penetrated to the cell, Gomez indicated by signs his wish not to be disturbed. Let his commander see him in his humiliation, and dispose of him as he would.

With his naked sword in hand, Don Jose came and looked down at him with a gloomy frown.

Gomez could not meet his eye; but there was nothing in this to arouse suspicion.

Without a word the commandant ordered that he be released, and turned away.

Was he secretly relieved at this way out of a delicate situation?

With the curt imperiousness of a Spanish officer to his subordinate, unsoftened by the tie of kinship, he ordered Alverado to follow him to a private interview, where, after a pause of gloomy reflection, he transfixed him with an eagle-like glance, and slapping his thigh sharply, said:

"Come, sir! this is now your business! Have you the pluck to bring me his heart's blood on the point of your sword?"

Alverado was standing proudly, with folded arms. He repelled, with icy *hauteur*, the way in which the commandant chose to put the case.

"I had already determined to make the attempt, before he fell into our hands."

"The way is now open. See that you improve it."

And with a cold wave of the hand the commandant indicated his dismissal.

"I will not sleep upon it, sir."

And bowing ceremoniously, Alverado left his presence.

He was as good as his word, and as early as etiquette permitted in the morning, sent a friend to look for Tom Templeton, with a challenge to mortal combat.

Meanwhile Charley Osborne was held a prisoner, it being plainly impossible for him to effect his escape in broad daylight.

But never was there such a spectacle of mischievous delight as his pretty jailer.

"Ah! this is worth living for!" cried the irrepressible maid, tossing her hair back from her temples. "Look you, senor!—everybody in breeches is stamping about and swearing what he would have done if he had been in poor Gomez's place. The most wretched poltroon of the lot—and it is hard to make choice among them—would not have let you off short of drinking your blood! These patches of humanity are loading my brave Gomez with insults—pest seize them!"

"But this is not the chief source of my delight, though it is some fun to listen to the braggarts. But only fancy the supreme felicity of getting a duenna under one's thumb, so that she dare not say her soul is her own! Oh, the dance of last night was nothing to what I could execute to-day!"

"Then I must amuse you with the gossip of the town. Never had these human carrion-crows such delicious pickings. They have their heads

together at every corner. There will be few unburnt dinners in San Hernandez to-day."

But her account was robbed of its spice by the suppression of two signal items. She said nothing of Tom's approaching duel, nor did she make any mention whatever of Maude Granville and the piquant stories that clustered around her name.

It was after this was seemingly done with that she said:

"But now, Senor, we come to matters of vastly greater importance. Who is this lady to whom you made such constant, yet flip-pant, allusion last night? Do you really love her?"

Chiquita assumed the role of the coquette of his last night's adventure with perfect assurance, which she was able to do by reason of having overheard every word that had passed between Charley and Maude in the garden of the dancing-hall.

"Will you ever forgive me for that nonsense?" pleaded Charley, with not a little chagrin at having been so cleverly caught.

"It is not I, but you!" insisted Chiquita. "Do you love her?"

Then a mental picture of the bewitching little invalid on the sofa caused a wave of tenderness to swell in Charley Osborne's breast; and while under its influence, he answered with a glow of sincerity quite unusual in his intercourse with women;

"Yes, I do."

"And you intend to marry her?"

"If she will have me."

"When?"

"To-day, if I could get her."

Then Chiquita drew a deep breath of satisfaction, Charley never dreaming that his prompt answers had supplied the key-stone to the arch of the plot that was forming in her teeming brain.

"Well, sir," she said, "for your own sake and for mine, I am going to demand a pledge of you that no gentleman, in the circumstances, could refuse. I suppose you are heretics—you and your friend, Senor Templeton?"

"Heretics?" repeated Charley, to whom this was not a very familiar word.

"You are no good Catholics," explained Chiquita.

"Well, I am not a very good anything!" confessed Charley, modestly. "But Tom is a man after your own heart, if you are particular in such matters."

"Senor Templeton is a Catholic?" exclaimed Chiquita, leaning forward with glistening eyes and bated breath, so delighted was she with the removal of this one objection to Tom as a husband for her darling.

"Yes, and a devout one, too," was his friend's assurance.

"At least," said the maid, well content, "you reverence this volume. Put your hand between its leaves."

And she opened a rare old folio copy of the Bible in Spanish which she had brought from her master's library, and closed it down upon Charley's extended hand.

"Now swear to me that to no one in the world, save only your friend, Senor Templeton, and the lady whom you say you wish to marry, will you ever reveal anything happening between your entrance into the dance-hall last night and your quitting of this house to-night."

With some surprise at the qualifications, Charley gave the required pledge.

"Swear to me," resumed Chiquita, "never to reveal to Senor Templeton any occurrence during that period not already known to him, and further never to allude to the events of that period if it is possible to avoid it, and if forced to speak, to restrict your words to the smallest possible compass."

Charley gave this pledge, but with a growing sense of the plotter's business qualities.

"Swear to me," was the third requirement, "to make your addresses to the Senorita Granville as soon as you have reason to believe that she will listen favorably to your suit, and to press for an immediate marriage."

"Well," said Charley, "it seems to me that you are stretching your privilege a little; but as it accords so well with my own wishes, I will swear to that too."

"Swear never to reveal to this lady anything that occurred from the moment of the going out of the lights at the fandango to the moment of your being entirely clear from this house. You may talk to her as much as you and she please about anything before the going out of the lights."

Charley laughed.

"You may safely make that concession!" he said. "I am not at all likely to avail myself of the privilege. To this part of your exactions I swear most heartily."

"Finally, swear to observe the spirit of what I have tried to bind you to, so that if I have failed in the exact wording, you shall have no technical loophole through which to excuse the virtual defeat of my purpose."

"Oh, you are an adept at diplomacy! You have bound me hand and foot. But I give you this pledge, too."

"So help you Heaven!"

"So help me Heaven!"

"Well, then, be a good boy, and submit to imprisonment here for to-day, and maybe to-night the good fairies will put something nice in your stocking!"

And with dancing eyes, the full significance of which Charley did not yet dream, she glided out of the room.

She came back to say:

"There are two persons who can at any time release you from your pledges—my mistress and I!"

Then she was finally gone, leaving Charley agape with surprise. What interest had Francisca in his flirtation with her maid?

CHAPTER XXII.

DESPERATE CASES REQUIRE DESPERATE REMEDIES.

THE prize to be fought for in that den of human wolves, Maude Granville was terrified beyond anything dreamed of in the most hideous nightmare of her life.

With a feeling that her knees were sinking under her, and that she no longer had the strength even to use her own weapon against herself, or to make the slightest effort of any kind, her eyes rolled mechanically toward the open window near which she stood.

There she discovered the man who had turned her over to this nameless fate, standing on the outside, leaning with his elbows on the window-ledge, and looking in upon the opening conflict with the same interest that he might have manifested over a prize-fight.

She saw no pity, nor indeed any further interest in her, in the eager smile on his face. He seemed only curious to see whether his lieutenant had the "sand" to "stand off" the whole crowd opposed to him.

But it was impossible to be in such a strait and not appeal to him, however hopeless the prospect. He alone had the power to save her, if he would.

"Oh, sir!" she cried, staggering toward him, "you cannot have the utter ruthlessness to abandon me to these fiends!"

"Senorita," answered Sancho, lifting his hat with an affectation of the utmost politeness, that added to the horror of the situation, "I recommend you to my lieutenant. He is a clever fellow, if you keep drink away from him. Believe me, he is a perfect gentleman in every respect."

"I will do anything—anything you ask!" murmured poor Maude, feeling the deathly horror of a swoon creeping over her.

"You will write the letter?"

"Anything!"

The girl was completely crushed.

Sancho tugged at his mustache, with a perplexed frown.

"It is a pity that it has gone so far," he said, as if in doubt as to how he might proceed. "I may have taken you a little hastily at your word, but I supposed you were resolved."

"Oh, do not stop to palter!" cried Maude. "Take me out of this! Take me out! take me out!"

"You see, it is like this," still argued the bandit chief. "My men are under my control, of course, within certain bounds; but it is not easy to take from them what I have voluntarily given them. But the lieutenant, as I said, is a clever fellow. If he gets you, I may be able to make terms with him. I will not disguise to you that I want the letter bad enough to do anything that I can do. I wish you had not put me in such a predicament. A woman, as well as a man, should know her mind!"

And the speaker frowned as if vexed at this tardy reconsideration.

"Think—think!" gasped Maude, clinging to the window ledge to keep her from sinking to the floor, "if it were—were—Perside!"

Sancho started, and turned his eyes upon her with an altogether new expression in them. He looked shocked.

"Save me!" she breathed again, everything seeming to be receding, and all sounds becoming confused and faint.

"I will!" cried the bandit, with sudden animation.

And putting his hand on the window-ledge, he leaped through with the agility of an athlete.

With an inarticulate murmuring sound, the girl sunk to the floor, to crouch down there in utter exhaustion, clinging desperately to her wavering consciousness.

The chief's entering into renewed negotiation with her, seemed to have arrested the conflict.

With their weapons still in readiness, the men waited, glaring at their commander with sullen frowns, like so many dogs each with his paw on a bone, the possession of which is menaced.

"Come, my men," cried their chief, stalking boldly into their midst, "if you can have nothing without fighting over it, I retract my gift. Save your blows for what will pay."

"But it takes two parties to make a bargain!" interposed a vicious-looking fellow, of greater

size and strength than his chief. "The girl belongs to us, by a rule of our band. You turned her over of your own free will. I, for one, stand on my rights!"

"What! Mutiny?" shouted the bandit chief.

And with a lightning bound, he sprang toward the offender, felling him to the floor with a single blow.

Then, planting his foot upon the fallen man, and drawing both revolvers, he glared around him, and demanded:

"Who's master here? Speak! If any one has anything to say, now is the time! When I cease to rule, it will be as bait for the mountain wolves. But I will prepare a feast for them before I go! Who wants to accompany me?"

The men drew back with sullen, hang-dog submission.

"Put that fellow in irons!" commanded Sancho, at once turning his back upon them all, and going up to Maude with the same quiet self-possession, as if nothing unusual had taken place.

She struggled to her feet as he approached, and he offered his arm with all the grace of a carpet knight.

"If the senorita will accord me the distinguished honor!"

And he led her from the room, his men now perfectly respectful, though apparently not well pleased with their loss.

Back to the hut where Madre Maldito received them with her wonted malicious grin.

"It takes the commandant to fetch 'em! He! he! he! That's only the first lesson, my beauty!"

"Execrable vermin—away!" commanded the chief, waving her back.

Bobbing and courtesying with mock deference, but still chuckling, as she rubbed her wrinkled hands in ghoul-like glee, Madre Maldito made way, and they passed into the hut.

"I beg you to consult your own convenience about the note. There is no especial hurry. Lie down till you are quite recovered."

"Wine, here!" to Madre Maldito.

"It will not matter if your hand-writing is a little agitated. It would be so under any circumstances. It is necessary only to say that you are under Mr. Osborne's protection. I will do myself the distinguished honor to call upon you in the course of half an hour. Senorita, a Dios!"

And the polite rascal bowed himself out.

When he returned, the note awaited his approval.

"Excellent, excellent!" he exclaimed, having run his eye through it. "And now, senorita, it is but due myself and my charming Perside, to show you that she is not falling into the clutches of such a monster as it must at present appear to you."

Thereupon, going to the door of the hut and throwing it open, he called:

"Pedro, my friend, enter!"

And in stalked the gigantic fellow whom, half an hour ago, his commander had knocked down for insubordination, and ordered to be put into irons.

Politeness sat upon this fellow with less grace than defiance. He was awkward and shambling, as he bowed before Maude with a broad grin.

"This," said Sancho, "is my right-hand man. I am indebted to him for the saving of my life on two or three occasions; and whatever my requirement, he never fails me. You will pardon us the little comedy we played upon you. This will assure you that you were never safer in your life than when you appeared to be at the mercy of a lot of mountain bandits. We are not such ill-behaved fellows as is generally believed."

And throwing open the shutters that till now had intercepted the view, he disclosed his men ranged before the hut in smiling ranks.

At this signal the lieutenant shouted:

"In honor of our captain, boys!"

And Maude had never heard a more ringing cheer than went up from those merry mountain-men.

"And that was all a farce?" she exclaimed, coloring.

"While I would not have caused you serious injury even to secure the note," answered Sancho, bowing low, "it was of sufficient importance to me to make me willing to expose you to a temporary shock. You will not be surprised if I hint that Perside, in common with most of Eve's charming daughters, has a spice of jealousy in her nature."

"But she has no reason to be jealous of me!"

"I am led to understand that in the cold North where everything is figured down to dollars and cents, even love is reasonable. But it must be a very odd sort of love. We have nothing like it under the tropics—thank God!"

"My little darling knows that you attended the fandango in her disguise, and that you have disappeared. Imagine the torture of that long night of waiting for your return! She has shown her faith in my love by divining the truth at once. She alternates between despair and insane rage. In vain have I sworn to her, by all the oaths with which I am acquainted—

and my range is not a limited one!—that the instincts of true love could not be so deluded; and that, discovering at a glance that absence of her personality in the disguise in which I had expected to find it, I had nothing further to do with you. She refuses to believe me."

"But why complicate matters by telling her an untruth? Couldn't you have acknowledged that you had captured me by mistake?"

"And lose her forever!" ejaculated Sancho. "Can you be a woman and propose such a blunder? Admit that you are here, and then try to persuade her—Thank God I am not quite an imbecile yet!"

And Sancho stared in amazement at such faithfulness in what had hitherto appeared to him a very clever specimen of her sex.

"You have seen her?" asked Maude.

"For the sight of her I risked my precious neck—not for the first time—in San Hernandez. She paid me the compliment to attempt my life, and then her own."

"The silk you gave her has been torn into shreds; the fan, broken into fragments; the necklace, pulverized under foot. She calls them bribes for which she sold her lover to you. Your life would not be worth an old song, if she had you in her power for two seconds."

"Well, I have been in the dirt at her feet. You, who do not understand our ardent southern nature, will think it mean-spirited that I permitted her to spurn me with the prettiest little foot that was ever put to such passionate use. But I!—I caught it and kissed it, literally carrying out our Spanish compliment. Let her rage. Was it not all for love of me? She could but inflame my passion more and more. Ah! she is divine! Is it nothing to have one who loves you to the point of murder and—above all—suicide? Perside! Perside! Perside!"

The bandit went off into a rhapsody, his face glowing, his eyes humid with tender emotion.

"Well," he went on, "do I owe her nothing—her who has so ravished me with delight? It seems to me that even your cold northern nature must see in this some extenuation, at least, of the harshness of my course toward you."

"But I do not see how this fraud can help you," protested Maude.

"Because, perhaps, you have not yet realized the whole of my purpose."

"With reference to me?"

"And Senor Osborne."

"But you have no right to couple me with him in any way!"

"Your own inclination shall decide how far, after the limit which serves my purpose."

"What purpose?"

"To satisfy Perside at all hazards."

"And what is the least that will satisfy her?"

"Proof that I have had nothing to do with your disappearance."

"And hence you desire to make it appear that I have eloped with Mr. Osborne. The thing is too absurd. People do not elope when there is not the shadow of an obstruction to their marriage, if they themselves desire it."

"But lovers sometimes become desperate; and having half a lady's heart, run away with her, trusting to the voluntary surrender of the other half, when it will no longer do any good to withhold it. Pardon me, senorita!—but I have discovered in you an arrant flirt—just the sort of a woman to drive a reckless lover to such a recourse!"

Maude Granville's heart began to beat wildly. What did all this portend? Suddenly she became afraid to penetrate too deeply into Sancho's plans. At the same time she was devoured with curiosity as to what the near future held in store for her.

"Let us pursue this no further," she said. "I find myself helpless in your power. I am not responsible for anything you may do in despite of me."

"Senorita, leave the matter in my hands, if you please. Trust me, I shall do nothing eminently distasteful to you."

Was there a covert twinkle in the bandit's eye? What did he think of her relations with Charley Osborne? What was he about to do?

He bowed himself out, leaving her for the rest of the day to resolve these questions between alternating surges of the wildest hopes and fears. Now she could clap her hands with gay laughter, and now hide her face with shame. What would Charley think of her?

Just before sunset, she was called upon by Sancho's lieutenant to prepare for the saddle, and filled with dismay and a burning sense of shame to find that she was on her way back to San Hernandez.

Was she about to be returned to Tom, or confronted with Charley, after that humiliating note? Captivity and Mother Maldito were preferable.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GOING IT BLIND.

WHEN Tom Templeton was carried to Golden Bow, the surgeon who attended him heard the story of his encounter while he was making the preliminary examination.

A woman's scream had been heard; then came pistol-shots and Tom's cries for help. The res-

cuers had found him unconscious, though they were in time to frighten off his assailants, who seemed bent upon capturing him. Indeed, he had been dragged some distance to where horses were in waiting, but there his would-be kidnappers had been compelled to abandon him for want of time to get him promptly mounted for transportation.

Of course the surgeon already knew of the scene with which the fandango had broken up.

"It was Saumarez's crowd," he decided, at once. "The girl was the old Don's daughter, beyond a doubt. If this fellow is lucky dog enough to get her sweet on him, he must make his calculations to bolt Saumarez along with her. He's got off mighty cheap, so far. There ain't a scratch on him beyond this little crack on the head. It won't hurt him any, only we want to keep him quiet for a spell. I reckon he'll be for jumping up with blood in his eye, when he comes round, so I'll just give him a mite of a hypodermic by way of precaution. He'll pass from this coma into a healthy sleep, and all you have to do is to let him alone. By noon we'll have him out as bright as a new dollar."

Tom did even better than the doctor's prediction. Protected from disturbance by men whose rule was to "obey orders if they broke owners," he slept even past the middle of the afternoon. But when he came to himself he was, as the surgeon had prophesied, ready for anything.

The first thing he discovered was that he was surrounded by a host of warm friends, chief among whom was Cap Frobisher—of whom the reader will have to be reminded, as the man pointed out by Charley Osborne as the probable opposition candidate for alcalde against Alverado Saumarez.

From Frobisher Tom learned that he had been called upon several times during the day by a very polite, yet equally sarcastic gentleman, who claimed to represent the interests of Senor Alverado Saumarez, the same being wounded in his honor by certain indignities put upon him by Senor Templeton. In satisfaction of his grievance, he demanded the amends due from one gentleman to another in the circumstances.

"At what time did he first call?" asked Tom.

"About nine," was the answer.

"And again?"

"Just before dinner, and finally immediately after it."

"And you did not call me!" cried Tom, reproachfully, a flush of annoyance overspreading his face.

"For a Greaser?" exclaimed Frobisher, contemptuously. "I reckon not!"

"But in a case of this kind—"

"I gave him his option," said Frobisher, coolly. "If he was impatient, I would fight him and his master, to keep them amused while they were waiting."

"But it looked like a shirk. I suppose, though, you let him see me?"

"Back my word with an infernal Greaser? This is the only thing I ever back it with!"

And Cap Frobisher drew his revolver and shook it.

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Tom. "But where is Charley Osborne? You might have referred the fellow to him. Charley must know that I would make good any arrangement he agreed to."

Then he learned that Charley had not made his appearance that day.

"We organized a search party, and scoured the town, but learned nothing of him till the reception of this note, not twenty minutes ago. We then suspended proceedings, to get your decision on it."

And, with an expression of embarrassment on his countenance that filled Tom with uneasiness even in advance, Frobisher produced a note which he handed to him.

"One word," he said, before letting go his hold on the paper. "The lady who accompanied you here—"

"Eh! Miss Granville? Nothing has happened to her?" cried Tom, in dismay.

"It appears that she went to the fandango; and it is believed that she was the rival dancer to the lady who was then in your company—"

"Impossible!" burst in Tom. "We left her at the *fonda*, ill!"

"Not so ill but that she borrowed a masquerade dress, and made her way to the fandango—or at least set out for it."

"Unattended! She would not do such a thing! There was no need. Charley would have been only too glad to go with her, if she had expressed the wish."

"However that may be, you may change your opinion as to what she would or would not do, after you have read the note. Let me premise that it was left as you see, open; which must account to you for my knowledge of its contents."

"Left? By whom?"

"That is unknown. It was found pinned against the outside of the door of the room recently occupied by Miss Granville, by a sliver of wood, thrust into a crack in the door. If any one saw it put there, it must have been one of those accursed Greasers; and it is a hopeless task to try to get anything out of them. But

that will probably be of little importance, if you recognize the hand-writing."

By this time Tom had run his eye through the note. It was but a line, stating that the writer was under the protection of Mr. Osborne, and did not wish to be interfered with till she chose to present herself again to her friend and Charley's.

"And what do you make of this?" cried Tom, in amazement.

Frobisher smiled.

"Is it really the lady's writing?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly," admitted Tom.

"Then I imagine we need have no further concern in the matter."

"But what does it mean? Why should she seek Charley Osborne's protection in preference to mine? I am responsible to her father for her."

Frobisher smiled still more broadly.

"She is of age, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Well, Osborne is a dashing fellow. He generally has his way with the ladies—"

"My dear sir! He is—or has pretended to be—my friend! He—"

"Probably does not deserve your qualification. But he may have taken the notion to be married without the usual delays. You will be a better judge than I whether he could persuade the lady to his wishes. But if, as you say, that is her writing, it looks to me very like a voluntary elopement."

Tom frowned in palpable discontent.

"I will look into this matter," he said.

"Meanwhile, would it be asking too much of one so recently a stranger, to depend upon you for service in this other matter of Senor Saumarez?"

"Sir, you would be conferring a favor upon me, even if you were not Charley Osborne's friend. Nothing could please me more, except the chance to meet him myself."

"You are very kind. Make any arrangements you please; only stipulate that it shall be to the death!"

"Saumarez is no trifle. I will give him credit for that. What is your choice of weapons, etc.? Revolvers, of course. But if you have any choice of caliber or—"

"I stipulate nothing, save that it shall be to the death! Give him the choice of everything. I insist upon it."

"But he will choose swords. He is equal to a trick of that kind, if it can be done without a technical breach of the code."

"Let him!"

"But you should be warned that he is a master with the rapier. No American gentleman is expected—"

"I am willing to risk my life on my proficiency with any weapon he can use."

"If you are sure of yourself," said Frobisher, with still lingering anxiety in his voice and look, "that alters the case. Nothing would please everybody better than to see him used up at his own game. I congratulate you, if you really have this unusual accomplishment."

"Let his representative arrange everything, and do you subscribe to it without examination—only not forgetting to make sure that it is to the death."

"And now, with your permission, and renewed thanks!"

And Tom bowed himself away, Cap Frobisher only delaying him for a final congratulatory wringing of the hand.

"By the gods, that's a lightning man!" he declared.

And the crowd agreed with him.

"Ef he wipes up the ground with that snoozer, it'll make the election a walk-over!" suggested a bystander—to which Cap Frobisher offered no comment.

Tom went directly to the *fonda*, and held Guillemma trembling under his eye while she told of the events of the evening before.

"And do you mean to tell me that Miss Granville was not ill at all?" he demanded.

"Senor, you will not betray me?" quavered the attendant, hesitating.

"Betray you? To whom?"

"To the senorita. I am a poor woman. The senorita is kindly disposed toward me—and of right, since I have served her faithfully. But you can ruin me with a word."

"I will no nothing but what is right for the protection of the lady. Tell me everything; and look to it that you speak the truth."

"Pardon me, then! She was deceiving you from the first. She overheard your conversation with your friend at the side of the house. She knew that he was no doctor. She knew why you wished the delay. She knew about the—believe me, senor! I have whispered to word of this to any living soul!—about the *bella Francisca*. And she too was willing to stay. Otherwise you could not have kept up the farce—"

"She never took that powder!" cried Tom, with conviction.

"No," answered Guillemma, with a hesitating smile.

"But she pretended to Osborne that she did."

"Senor, pardon me!—you alone, and your friend, were deceived."

"But why did she wish to stay in this poky place? I happen to know that she was as anxious to reach Frisco as I was. She was going after a new wardrobe."

"Senor," said Guillemma, insinuatingly, "your own anxiety was overcome."

Tom did not "drop."

"But nothing would have pleased her better than to have disappointed me."

"But for the appearance of Senor Osborne."

"And do you mean to tell me—"

"Do you know that he spent the afternoon here?"

"Why, no! I had no idea where he spent his afternoon."

He might have known, had he not been mooning over Francisca the while!

"He was here, hanging upon her every word. And she was charming; and he—you must know that few ladies would be indifferent to him."

"Well, I never thought about that," said Tom, not very enthusiastically. "Was she taken with him, do you think?"

"That is a delicate question, senor."

"True. Well, what do you make of this?"

And Tom produced Maude's note.

Guillemma glanced at it, and then with an apologetic smile:

"The senor forgets that I do not know his language."

"Ah! By the way, you were in the room with them?"

"Every moment! The senorita is discreet."

"But they spoke in English, so that you could not understand what they said."

"Not a word."

"And they might have arranged for a meeting before your face, without your being any the wiser."

"If so disposed."

Tom then translated the note, adding:

"Do you believe— But let me put it in another way. What do you think of it?"

"Now that the senorita has spoken for herself, that releases my tongue," answered Guillemma. "I have not the least doubt that this was all arranged with the senorita's free consent—if not here, then at the fandango."

"I have been told that she was with him during the whole evening. The description of her dress leaves no chance for mistake. He was seen to leap over a bush with her in his arms. I have heard of the dance, and his wild admiration. Then came their flight together."

"Here she was bewitched with him!"

"How do you know that? By your own admission, you could not understand a word they uttered."

"The eye, senor; her delight after he was gone. She hugged and kissed even me! I am no beauty—I! To be sure, I have had my day!"

And the old beldam's face brightened coquettishly with recollections of her youth.

"Well," said Tom, reflectively, "if they have really taken a notion to each other, I can see no objection to it. Charley did seem to be far enough gone. But I attached no importance to it, supposing that he was flirting with a new flame the moment he was out of her sight. And he was fooling me all along! Confound him! I'll get even with him for this, somehow!"

Tom's mind was now almost entirely relieved as to Maude's fate. At any rate, he was willing to wait till Charley returned with her, which he did not believe would be long delayed. He knew that such a senseless escapade was thoroughly in character for the flighty Miss Granville. For the rest, he believed in the royalty of Charley's friendship as a warrant against any unworthy trick upon him or upon any one under his protection.

Nothing then remained but to place himself at the disposal of Senor Alverado Saumarez.

Upon his meeting Cap Frobisher, the latter looked anxious.

"The meeting is appointed for an hour before sunset," he said, "to be decided, as I feared, by the sword."

"Nothing could suit me better!" affirmed Tom, promptly.

"I should have stood for a delay which would give you at least one night's rest, but that you insisted so explicitly upon leaving everything to them."

"You would have offended me if you had made a single exception."

"But the blow you received? They must be calculating upon that!"

"He is welcome to any advantage it will afford him. I would not exchange for the memory of the blow I had the satisfaction of giving him—and the weight of my foot on his breast!"

And Tom laughed.

"I like to see a man go to an encounter in this spirit. You will win!" declared Cap Frobisher, grasping Tom's hand with the same look of admiration with which he had followed his retreating figure when pronouncing him "a lightning man."

"Meanwhile," he added, with some modest hesitation, "though I lay no claim to proficiency with the sword, it occurs to me that, if you don't happen to be in form just at present, I have a brace of blades, and possibly a few minutes' exercise might put you in better trim."

"You are very kind and thoughtful; and I will avail myself of your offer if I get back in time. But I have a trifle of business that must be disposed of first; and the time is short between now and an hour of sunset."

"It is—altogether too short. I want you to go with me at once; have a single brisk bout, then a good rub-down, and to bed till the last minute."

"My dear sir, don't borrow any trouble about me. I never was in better condition in my life. Look here!"

And he held his hand at arm's length, to show that it was as steady as a rock.

Instead of looking at this evidence of his condition, Frobisher kept his eyes fixed on Tom's face, and clapping his hand on his shoulder in a fraternal way, said:

"See here, Templeton! this won't do. Will you let me speak freely? Remember, I am an old friend of Osborne; and if I'm not a good friend of yours in the time to come, it won't be my fault!"

Tom at once and warmly seized the hand of the older man.

"I was never more prepossessed in my life!" he declared, heartily. "Hang the date of our acquaintance! Time don't count in such matters. Now, drive ahead. You'll find that I take to advice and correction as kindly as Charley does."

It was not true that it was as easy to approach Tom Templeton on a delicate subject as Charley Osborne; but now his smile was most engaging, and invited friendly familiarity.

"It is about the lady!" said Frobisher, with marked embarrassment.

"Well, let us admit so much," answered Tom, not quite so heartily as Charley would have done.

"It won't do to precede this meeting with that worry on your mind."

"So much the more reason for my getting it off!" said Tom, with a smile.

"But you can learn nothing definite in the short time at your command, and your failure will only serve to increase your anxiety."

"And do you suppose," answered Tom, with an outcropping of emotion which suggested what lay hidden beneath the surface, "that I should find utter inaction more soothing?"

"Let us see if you have not reason for assurance. You know that the lady had no cause to fear personal violence from her cousin. At most, he could only take her home, with or against her will."

Frobisher hesitated nervously, and then began again:

"If it has occurred to you that he might possibly have been driven to attempt to abduct her—"

Tom started violently.

"It has occurred to me!" he cried, with a burst of suppressed passion that made Cap Frobisher think that here was a dangerous man to cross.

"But, to begin with," he explained, soothingly, "if she were not now at home, there would be a stir at the casa, and it would be impossible to prevent the rumor from getting abroad."

"Has not her father absolute command over his dependents?"

"But he himself would not remain quietly at home, with his daughter absent."

"Unless he was in collusion with that villain! I have reason to know that he favors the union."

"But not with such unnecessary violence. Where would his daughter be more subject to his wishes than under his immediate care?"

"There's something in that."

"Besides, if Alverado had abducted her, he would not be here to fight you."

"That," cried Tom, seizing Frobisher's hand with an outburst of gratitude as if this concurrence of opinion lifted an incalculable burden from his heart—"that is the thought on which I have built! She is safe so long as he is here within my reach. Do not fear me!—he shall not escape! Now you know why I insisted upon its being mortal. Aside from her safety, I do not want the fellow's life. In fact, nothing is more repugnant to my feelings than the thought of burdening my conscience with the death of even so graceless a scoundrel as he. So far I have never taken a human life, though to escape it I have once or twice had to take long risks for my own. But I do not wish my wife to have cause to shudder at the touch of my right hand! It is partly for this reason that I am anxious to be assured that she is safe. If I can get proof that she is at home, still under the protection of her father, I will not take his life."

"Then," exclaimed Frobisher, earnestly, "I hope you will remain in doubt. I freely confess that I, for one, do not wish him to escape. If he does, it will before the end cost this community the lives of men worth ten of him!"

"Still," insisted Tom, "I think I will be at some pains to satisfy myself, if possible, before the combat. I cannot rid myself of the feeling that the duello is a kind of murder, unless there is cause that justifies the homicide."

Cap Frobisher looked a little blankly at view of the Code, for which he had a Southerner's

reverence. In his eyes it was the natural, if not the divinely appointed means of keeping gentlemen from being ungentlemanly!

However, he let Tom go his way with no diminution of personal respect.

"Whatever his theories," he said to himself, "he doesn't hold them from lack of sand, like the puling milksops that usually give us that rot!"

And Tom—where the gods to be good to our lover?

At a loss how to proceed, recognizing the utter madness of presenting himself anywhere in the vicinity of the casa, he was wandering aimlessly about the town, gazing wistfully into every strange face that he encountered, longing yet fearing to accost some one from whom he could draw the current gossip, from which he might glean some hint to lay the ghosts of terror that haunted him, when suddenly his heart was brought into his throat.

He heard a light step behind him, and turning to look just as the person passed, he caught a single lightning gleam from an eye whose fellow was hid from the admiring gaze of gods and men within the jealous folds of a *robosa*; and at the same instant heard, or fancied that he heard a low murmur, which resolved itself into a musical:

"Senor!"

If he was right in this impression: such an invitation might have no connection whatever with the subject of his anxiety.

But there was something in that laughing eye, something in the jaunty little figure, something in the swaying grace with which it floated on before him, which brought vividly before his imagination the picture of a certain roguish little maid to whose genius for intrigue he already owed so much—far more, indeed, than he imagined!

Scarcely able to control his eagerness so as not to attract public attention to the fact that he was following her, Tom kept the mysterious damsel in sight, though she never looked round; and if she cast a glance in his direction at the turnings of the streets, it was so deft that he did not detect it.

So she led him to the outskirts of the town on the side opposite to the casa, proceeding by a route so tortuous that no one could have held her under observation for any distance greater than from one cross street to another, who was not following directly in her footsteps.

Never was the game of "follow my leader" conducted more cleverly, under the very eyes of the passers-by and the keen-scented noses of the gossips halting on the corners or craning their neck out of windows to talk forty to the dozen across the way, yet so as to elude detection.

Finally she disappeared round the corner of the last house on a street leading down to the river.

When Tom came up, he discovered beyond this another house, facing the water, and so embowered in a chaparral that only from the opposite bank could it be observed whether he entered here or passed on up the stream.

As he got opposite the door, he saw that it was slightly ajar, yet not enough so that he could see into the room.

There could be no doubt that the girl had entered here, as there was nowhere else for her to go and be out of sight with the start she had of him.

Had she left the door open on purpose? Was there design in her movements from the first, or was it all the creation of his overheated imagination?

She might be the innocent little coquette he was looking for. She might be a decoy sent out to lure him to this deserted spot for the purpose of assassination!

In that room might wait the laughing Chiquita, or a band of bravos to spring upon him and do him to death before he could make an outcry.

With a tender thought of Francisca, and a hope that he might yet hold her to his heart without the barrier of her cousin's blood between them, Tom dropped his right hand upon the butt of his revolver, thrust the door open with his left, and stepped into the room.

The door closed so abruptly behind him, that some one must have been standing behind it, in readiness to shut it the instant he was inside.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MERRY LITTLE MAID.

SURELY Tom Templeton was excusable for a start of almost sufficient violence to be called a leap to one side, as he faced about and drew his revolver. Nor need he have felt any chagrin at the burst of ringing merriment with which he was greeted.

"Ha! ha! ha! Here is our famous lover! Lend but an ear to his oaths by moonlight, and you will believe him as constant as the stars; but none the less on the morrow he is ready, at the flash of a black eye, to follow on to purgatory, or into a den of bravos! And it is men who decry the truth of women!"

But the delighted lover was not to be stood off by any such chaff as this.

Into its holster went his revolver, and spring-

ing forward, he seized both of her hands, and kissed them rapturously, crying:

"Chiquita! You are the light of my eyes!"

"Hey! hey! listen to him, ye gods! Shall I tell my mistress that you have transferred your affections to her maid?"

"Tell her anything, so that you tell me she is safe!" cried Tom, throwing his arm about her.

"On my soul, I am afraid of you!" laughed the little conspirator, delighted with the intensity of his love, as evinced by his ecstatic abandonment, the glow on his face, the dancing brilliancy of his eyes, the quivering passion of happiness in his voice. "Even your friend—who will never fall ill of bashfulness—is nothing to this. Pray you remember, senor, that we are alone in this deserted house! I, a timid little thing, am entirely at your mercy, with no protection but to report your conduct to my mistress, if I ever escape you! Do you fancy that she is so angelic as to be without the common human weakness of jealousy? It is only in Heaven that there is no marriage or giving in marriage, and I fancy even there a lover is not permitted such license as this."

"Tell me she is safe!" insisted Tom.

"Come! come!" bantered the girl, her black eyes fairly dancing with elfish mischief, "I dare you to kiss me!"

"Done!" cried Tom.

And he made good his acceptance as quick as lightning.

Then he released her.

"Oh! oh! oh!" screamed the minx, yet so guardedly that there was no danger of her voice being heard beyond the four walls of the house.

Then she immediately gave a different significance to her outcry, by pursuing:

"Was there ever rare sport spoiled by such recklessness! It is no compliment, senor, that you are so overjoyed about another as to be indifferent whether you strike my chin or the end of my nose!"

"But I shall not be without my revenge! Now I have you for life! Whenever I want a new ribbon, or a lace kerchief, I have but to blackmail you! My mistress, as you will learn to your cost, is the greatest stickler in the world for the proprieties in love. A word of this from me, and she will slay both of us guilty ones, and herself in the bargain! But if she prove so foolishly fond of you as to condone your offense, and stay her hand with only my blood, there is yet Gomez to drive his poniard into your back!"

"Well, sir, what have you to say for yourself now?"

"Only that you shall never betray me for want of ribbons, or kerchiefs, or anything else that will add to the ravishment of your bewitching little person!"

"La! what a tongue you have, to be sure!" cried Chiquita, with affected bashfulness.

"Well, I have been kissed many a time before in my life; but if you stand by your promise, I shall regret this infidelity to my poor Gomez less than any other."

"And now," pleaded Tom, "haven't you taxed my patience long enough? What of Francisca?"

"I have been preparing you, senor, for bad news."

"Bad news!"

"She is dying."

"Of love for me, you vixen?"

"Was there ever such conceit! Of chagrin at having involved herself in all this pother for the sake of a man who, after all, is no good Catholic!"

"Not a Catholic!" protested Tom. "Indeed I am!"

"On your honor," senor!—by the love you bear my mistress!" cried the little maid, with a sudden earnestness that took Tom by surprise.

"On my honor, he assured her, "and by such a love as no woman ever before inspired! What made you think otherwise?"

Chiquita replied with a deep inhalation of relief.

"You can't always tell about these Americans! I feared you were a heretic, which would have spoiled everything!"

"Well," her manner changing back to mischievous fun, "I shall come to believe you fellows, one of these days, if what you swear to turns out true like this!"

She did not tell Tom that this was an allusion to her recent interview on the subject with Charley Osborne; and our lover was too much engrossed in his more immediate concerns to pay any critical attention to her remarks.

"Did Francisca make a point of that?" he asked, eagerly.

"Well, to be honest with you, no," admitted the little maid.

Then, glancing quizzically at him out of the corner of her eye:

"It is a shame for me to tell you; but I'm afraid she has been so foolish as to think nothing about you, so far—"

"Nothing about me!" as the teasing Chiquita came to a halt.

"Save only that you are yourself, senor!"

"God bless her—and you!" cried Tom, delighted beyond measure.

"So much the greater reason," pursued the little maid, with a sudden assumption of the air

of a duenna, "why *somebody* should look out for her interests. And who is there but me?"

"There *could* be nobody more to *my* mind!" declared Tom.

At which Chiquita laughed hilariously.

"A duenna who drops notes at the feet of lovers who lack the wit to shape their own fate!"

"Is it fair to remind me of your services before I have had opportunity to show my appreciation of them? Leave off teasing me, and tell me—she is well, and looking hopefully forward to the issue of our love?"

"Do you take me for a love-letter? One would fancy you had the impudence to imagine that she had sent me to you, inscribed all over with pledges of undying devotion! Look me over! You will find nothing written on me, I assure you! Would she not have locked me in a closet, if she had dreamed that I was bent on such an errand as this? One day you will awake to the fact that you owe something to my pity, young man!"

"I owe the greatest happiness of my life to you! But at least you can tell me if she was hurt. I asked her, and she protested that she was all right; but I have been devoured with anxiety ever since. And you will be a dear good girl, and tell me the truth!"

"I more truthful than my mistress? Would I have the presumption? Aside from that consideration, the shortness of our acquaintance alone excuses you for placing reliance in anything I say to you. Those who have known me longest and best will tell you that I am an incorrigible little liar! Ask Benita! She judges me without fear or favor. But why should Francisca be hurt?"

Nothing in the little maid's tone or manner indicated the subtlety of this question. Tom could not guess that she had picked up every possible scrap of gossip about where and how he had been found; and that she threw out this seemingly innocent leader to draw from him how it had come about that he had lost and his friend got possession of his sweetheart, apparently with no consciousness on the part of either.

Tom told of the shock of that collision in the dark, when some one had dashed between them; and received the assurance that he need borrow no trouble on that account, since Francisca had sustained no physical injury whatever.

It was not so easy to relieve his apprehensions touching that ominous scream after their parting.

Without stopping to puzzle out just how the exchange of sweethearts had been effected, Chiquita saw that it was Maude who had been captured; and her pretense that she was under Charley Osborne's protection being evidence of intrigue, it was plain that, having deceived Tom as to her identity, she would find some way of still keeping him in the dark. Chiquita therefore felt safe in carrying out her own scheme.

"A man," she said, looking reflectively into Tom's eyes, "is a pig-headed animal, and generally goes blundering ahead in his own way, in spite of anything that can be said; and yet I am going to try to infuse into you a little tact, such as comes naturally to any woman. I am going to ask you to draw a line across the threshold of the dancing-hall, and another at the entrance of Francisca's home, and never in your future intercourse with her to make any allusion to any event that may have happened between those two."

"What? What? What?" shouted Tom, beside himself with terror and rage.

"Ah, look at him!" cried the *intriguante*. "See how white he is!—how his eyes glare! He is a murderer at heart already! One would think he was about to eat even unoffending me!"

"I'll have his heart's blood!" hissed Tom, through his clinched teeth.

"Whose heart's blood, pray?" demanded the little maid, quite coolly.

"Say no more!" cried the outraged lover, starting toward the door.

"Stay!" protested Chiquita, throwing herself in his way. "Did I not tell you? The most pig-headed of his kind!"

"Do not trifle with me! I do not wish to know! My poor darling! But I will carry her heart, with my sword through it!"

"A fine present for a poor darling! What would she do with such an article of *bijouterie*? Come, senor! I perceive that you begin to give evidence of a return to your senses. But I am curious to know whom you are going forth to slay."

Tom began to waver. The teasing light in her eyes was not consistent with any very serious grievance on the part of her mistress, whose honor and happiness were as dear to her, almost, as to Tom himself.

"That villainous cousin of hers!" he answered, to draw her out.

"And wherefore?" she asked, with exasperating persistence.

"Shall he offer her an indignity, and I not resent it? If he were a thousand times her cousin, I would carve him into inch pieces!"

And Tom ground his teeth with a recurrent spasm of rage.

"Him, to whose charge, whatever his other

faults, cannot be laid the slightest indecorum in all his association with her, save only the tearing away of her mask in your presence, which, I must say, you requited handsomely. It may be of interest to you, senor, to know that from that moment to this Alverado Saumarez has not rested his eye nor the weight of his finger upon his cousin."

"Is that so, Chiquita?—on your honor as a woman!"

"On the honor of my mistress, which I hold more sacred than my own."

"God bless you! But it was one of his villains, then. I will find him out! I will—"

"Abate your ardor, senor. The woman you love has suffered nothing that need cause you a moment's uneasiness, nor at which any woman but she would feel a pin's-worth of chagrin. But in securing her as your wife, you do not yet imagine what you are getting. She is the most exquisite creature the good God ever made!"

"Oh! I need no assurance of *that*!" cried the lover, in ecstasy.

"Listen! In all the years of her tender maidenhood she has never felt the touch of a man's hand, save only in those attentions which are permitted to the most distant courtesy. Now, for the first time in her life, barring only you, to whom she gladly accorded the right, she has felt herself in the arms of a stranger."

"Whose? Whose? Tell me his name! I will have his life!"

"One such that, if you knew, you would not dream of retaliating upon him!"

"But I would! Be he high or low, he shall not live to bring the blush to her cheek!"

"Now, now, you stupid fellow! Do you not see that it is *you* alone who can bring the blush to her cheek—that it is *you* alone who can wound her sensibilities indescribably more than is possible to any other? Of what avail the blundering idiocy which you men call satisfaction, after you have humiliated her beyond words to tell, by betraying a knowledge of what she considers a defilement, though she knows well enough that it was not intended as a wanton insult? What are all other men in the world to her, living or dead? Is it not *your* opinion that she prizes?"

"But you are a sensible man. You know that this is nothing, save in her supersensitive imagination. Will you, then, sacrifice her delicacy, that you may seek the gratification of a foolish resentment?"

"Come, come, senor! be guided by me. No one in all the world knows her as I do. I tell you she is Parian marble, she is Venetian glass! By one stupid word you can shatter the most exquisitely beautiful prize that ever fell to the lot of—well, a fellow who deserves a little something—I will admit that!"

"But who does not deserve such a priceless little friend and monitor as you?" cried Tom, with a burst of gratitude.

And then, since all this praise of his sweetheart was lotus to him:

"Go on! Tell me about her!"

"And spoil for you the happiness of finding out for yourself!" cried the little maid. "I have told you so much, only because I knew that, left to yourself, you would go floundering about till you broke her heart, only to bewail the results of your own bungling as a mysterious dispensation of Providence!"

"You are a wise little woman!" exclaimed Tom, pressing her hands again. "And I owe you more than I can ever repay."

"One word further. She will probably make it a matter of conscience to tell you about this—a folly in women which you sturdy fellows do not return! But if you are clever enough to evade her once or twice, she will not have the courage to take it up again. When you two are old and toothless, and get to maundering over your youth for the amusement of your grandchildren, it may come out. But it can then do no harm. She will laugh over it with you."

"You may depend upon me. With the way so clearly pointed out, I hope to display more cleverness than you at present give me credit for."

"Well, then, we come to the final question: When do you purpose to take her?"

"As soon as I can get her!"

"That is promptly answered. But you know the adage:—There is no time like the present."

"Nothing could delight me more! Every hour's delay is an age out of Paradise!"

"You go out to fight Senor Alverado an hour before sunset?"

"Yes."

"If he kills you our plans for the future will be futile; but if you kill him—"

"Look here, Chiquita! I have never in my life killed a man—not even in a fight, which is not easy to keep clear of in this country. Must her cousin be the first? He is her cousin, you know, good or bad. I had resolved not to kill him, unless he got me in a corner where I could not otherwise save my own life. I cannot tell you my repugnance to having his blood between us!"

"Well, well, senor!" cried the maid, with glowing eyes, "I am indebted to you for more and more confirming my good opinion of you! It is the Blessed Virgin who has rewarded the

devotion of my mistress, by giving her happiness into your keeping. But I must say that I fear you will be laying up trouble for yourself by sparing Alverado."

"Give me possession of her, and I will risk anything he can do!"

"Well, in this I will not pretend to direct you. It is not a woman's matter. You bearded fellows must manage one another."

"Let us say, then, that you overcome Alverado. If nothing happens to-night, on the morrow Francisca will be on her way to a nunnery in Mexico."

"To a nunnery!"

"If she does not consent to be married to her cousin at once."

"My God! Shall I be in time to-night? I will storm the *casa*, if necessary! Have her I will!"

"You shall, señor! But wits are the best weapons, in this sort of warfare. They leave no blood spilt; and spilt blood is the only thing that is past weeping for."

"Let me tell you something. You cannot be happy with your wife unhappy; and your wife loves her father so well—she does not realize how much yet—that even you cannot make her wholly content unreconciled to him."

"I will do everything in my power to conciliate him, once I have her fast!"

"Well, then, you have friends among your own people, upon whom you can rely?"

"Any number of them!"

"Senor Osborne, for instance?" with a covert twinkle in her eye.

"The rascal has run away with a lady who was in my charge!" answered Tom, innocently, to Chiquita's huge amusement. "I fancy they were ashamed to face me, after having trumped up a marriage on sight. But I shan't have much the advantage of them in that particular, and that's a fact!"

"Let your remaining friends, then—so many of them as you think necessary—put themselves at your back. If you survive the encounter with Alverado, cause a bonfire to be built in Golden Bow, so that the smoke can be seen from the *casa* windows. We do not want to trust to rumor. She does not know you are to fight, and I will not tell her till I see the smoke; so that I can assure her at the same time that you are safe."

"Nothing escapes your care, you thoughtful little creature!"

"At midnight come under her window. Come alone, but with men enough close at hand to prevent any interference from the peons at the *casa*."

"And she has agreed to this? Oh, Chiquita!"

"She has agreed to nothing. She does not even suspect that I am plotting to bring her happiness so near."

"Then what in the name of—"

"Peace! I promise for her. Did I not tell you that I know her better than any one else in the world?—better than she knows herself! But how could I bring her to such an agreement, without telling her the exigency?—that you are to fight Alverado, and that a nunnery awaits her if you are the victor."

"Let us arrange a set of signals," proposed Tom, tremulously, "so that there can be no possible miscarriage. It will not do to try this more than once. And, oh, it seems too good to be true!"

The signals which were to assure him that Francisca was in readiness were appointed.

Then, as he was going away, after a glowing expression of his undying gratitude, the little maid bethought her, and produced a bit of exquisitely-scented note-paper.

"I am a wretched little thief," she said, "but I thought that this might be of some comfort to you, since she sent no word."

Tom swooped down upon the prize like a bird of prey!

His eyes devoured but two words, traced in the daintiest lines that ever flowed from a pen:

"DEAR TOM!"

"Did she write this for me?" he cried, almost overcome.

"For you, cormorant! Does it not glut your inordinate conceit that she should write it for herself? Come! come! go! This house belongs to my mother. I knew that she would be out, and so brought you here. But she may return at any moment. Go! go! Must I push you out? But remember, Lothario, the wicked secret between us, which I shall hold over you all of your life!"

As he went with a bounding heart, and with her gay laugh ringing in his ears, how could he guess that he left behind a woman drowned in tears, who fell upon her knees to supplicate heaven for his protection—not for any merit of hers, but for the mistress she loved, who had so longed for happiness, and to whom it had now come in overflowing measure, if only Alverado Saumarez's sword did not pierce her heart through Tom Templeton's body!

CHAPTER XXV.

TO THE DEATH.

NEVER did duelist address himself to the business of skewering an antagonist with a

lighter heart. Tom Templeton was so happy that he included even his enemy in his universal good-will.

"Well! well! well! what has happened to you? You have undergone a transformation!" cried Cap Frobisher, when Tom presented himself for his preliminary exercise.

Well might he say so, looking at Tom's flashing eyes, his flushed face, his uplifted carriage, his brisk, vigorous stride.

"I have been drinking the nectar of the gods!" replied Tom.

"You are intoxicated with it—that's plain! But it's the kind of intoxication a man wants when he's going to fight. I'll risk you now. You'll have a clear, cool head."

Tom delighted his coach even more when he came to show the metal he was made of.

"You have a wrist of iron! Where did you learn that wrench? I nearly lost my blade! And I would give a year of my life for your sleight! But I'm going to put you to bed nevertheless. Alverado is nobody's fool with the sword!"

Tom had his rub-down, and then went dutifully to bed—and not only to bed, but to sleep. He arose, as he declared, feeling like a fighting-cock.

In that country and at that time the duello was as unreservedly open and public as the Test of Battle in the Middle Ages. The common dueling-ground was a glade just outside of the town, a flat-surfaced amphitheater inclosed in a chaparral. Here neither antagonist had any advantage of light or background, and the spectators could dispose themselves at ease under the shade of the trees.

When Tom arrived on the ground, he found himself anticipated by every male and nearly every female denizen of both towns, save only those of his immediate party. By the natural opposition of race antipathy, the Americans were congregated on one side of the glade, and the "Greasers" on the other.

The national characteristics manifested themselves in the disposition of the former to banter, while the latter were reserved, almost sullen, with an undercurrent of fierce hatred gleaming under their eyelids.

Their champion was attired as gayly as for his wedding.

"It's a pity to spile his ruffled shirt!" shouted one of the sovereign citizens of Golden Bow.

But when his brocaded and bullioned and many-buttoned jacket was removed, and his shirt-sleeve rolled up above the elbow, he displayed an arm that commanded respect, in spite of his dandified dress.

His head was closely bound in the silken kerchief commonly worn by the Spanish-Mexican, but the gaudy sash at his waist was replaced by a leather belt.

He affected a jaunty air, toying with his rapier, and smiling as he chatted lightly with his friends.

Plainly he wished to give out the impression that he considered this a gala occasion. It was but a bagatelle to carve an Americano!

There was nothing preentious about Tom Templeton, except that he wore top boots that came half-way up the thigh, of rather finer finish than is common in the mining district. For the linen shirt in which he traveled, he had substituted a flannel one, worn open at the breast. About his temples, to keep his hair from being thrown across his eyes, was bound a cambric handkerchief, folded so as to form a fillet.

He had subdued the buoyancy of his happiness; and his face now appeared impassive in its quiet gravity.

There was no difficulty about the preliminaries, Tom having insisted upon the concession of everything to his adversary.

The principals were placed; the seconds retired; there was a moment of breathless hush; then the word was given; and the steel came together with a clash.

Eye to eye, the men felt of each others' wrists, the blades giving forth a low, snakelike hiss as they glided by each other.

Tom stood still. Alverado began to move about him with dainty, guarded steps. He affected a light, tantalizing sword-play. A sarcastic smile dwelt on his lips. Never had he seemed more perfectly at ease.

The Mexicans came out of the sullen defiance that had clouded them at the outset. They began to exchange grins of congratulatory expectation, and to chatter excitedly.

"He is picking out the spot where the blood-letting will mar the corpse least!" declared one.

"Hang it all," growled a dubious American, yet so guardedly that his voice reached only the neighbor addressed, "is that infernal Greaser goin' to have a walk-over? We'll have to wade in an' clean 'em all out ef he does!"

"Don't you begin to hedge yit, Bill," replied his friend, eying Tom critically. "He's got a cool head, that chap has. Wait till he develops his game."

Gradually the sword-play became more animated. Tom had been fighting so steadily on the defensive that no one looked for anything brilliant from him, when suddenly he made a light-

ning-like lunge, that for a single breath made every beholder believe that he had pierced his adversary to the sword-hilt.

But his blade had traversed that of the Mexican with a rasping hiss, and his hilt clanged against the other ringingly.

After a parry that only a master could have accomplished, Alverado leaped back out of reach with the agility of a pauther, only the shredding of his dainty shirt just below his arm showing how nearly the serpent tongue of Tom's rapier had come to stinging his tender flesh.

There was an instant of breathless hush, in which every one stood staring with mouth agape. Then up from the ranks of the Americans went such a yell as was most trying to Mexican nerves.

"Look, look!" shouted a delighted spectator. "The Greaser has forgotten his smile!"

It was true that for one terrible instant Alverado's face had been drawn with terror. It remained pale in token of the lesson he had received, and in spite of his efforts to resume his old contemptuous nonchalance, it was plain that he now thoroughly respected his adversary.

But the conviction that he had some one worthy of his metal brought a wicked light into his eye. He at once settled down to a business-like determination. No more vanity! It was to the death!

The Americans were too eager to bet to keep apart, and many were soon intermingled with the Mexicans, shaking their money under the noses of their opponents, offering odds as wildly as if it were water.

They found takers, for the Greasers were far from despairing of their champion.

Their confidence was soon justified, for the next tide of fortune turned the other way.

Tom Templeton received a sword-thrust through the arm—through that strong right arm on which his life depended!

Then such a shriek of frantic delight as rasped its way from those scores of Greaser throats! In an instant they were transformed into a horde of dancing lunatics.

It must be admitted that the Americans turned ugly, and betrayed a disposition to save their man at any sacrifice of the code, and to pitch the final issue on a general *melee*.

Cap Frobisher sprang forward to interpose his blade, taking it for granted that his principal would have the ordinary respite for dressing his wound after the first blood.

But Alverado still pressed his adversary, shouting:

"It was to the death! to the death!"

"Back, back!" commanded Tom, waving his second off. "It is to the death!"

An exultant grin overspread Alverado's face as he pressed hotly on, now confident that his bloody blade would next find the heart to which that pierced arm could no longer oppose an effectual shield.

What followed was with such lightning swiftness as to preclude any possible interference.

The Mexican lunged savagely; the weapons interlocked; with a mighty wrench his blade was torn from his grip, to leap high into the air over his antagonist's head.

Then, before he could recover, Tom sprung in upon him, clutching his throat with his powerful left hand, with such a shock as to force him upon one knee, while his heart stopped its beating, in expectation of the eager quest of his conqueror's sword-point!

Every one waited to see the blade pressed home to the hilt.

Even the fallen man cried:

"Strike! My life is yours! I would not survive this indelible disgrace!"

Instead, after a momentary pause, which placed the fact of his option beyond all chance of doubt, Tom said:

"The life which is forfeit to me I give you back. It is your insolence to a lady under my protection that I repay with this blow."

And striking his antagonist on the cheek with the flat of his sword, he stepped back, leaving him free to arise unscathed save in his honor.

"Kill me! kill me!" cried the humiliated Mexican, staggering to his feet, and following his magnanimous conqueror with outstretched arms, to bare his bosom to the blow.

But Tom tossed his weapon to his delighted second, and pulled down the sleeve of his shirt.

"It was to the death! That was your own stipulation," insisted Saumarez, desperately.

"I offered you my life, if you could take it; but I had no intention of taking yours."

"Go an' suicide, Johnny! Thar ain't no objection to *that*!" shouted an American, with brutal exultation.

"It's a pity to leave sich carrion a-kickin', but we ain't butchers," added another.

"Our alcalde! our alcalde!" yelled a third.

The cry was caught up, and spread like wildfire.

Then Cap Frobisher did a magnanimous thing.

"Right you are, boys!" he shouted. "This is the man for alcalde. Chair him! Chair him!"

And Tom was instantly caught off his feet, and mounted on the shoulders of his enthusiastic admirers.

Then the rout swept on toward the town, leaving the vanquished Saumarez to go where he would to hide his humiliation.

But far in advance of it galloped a man who had set out the instant the issue of the conflict was certain.

The moment he came within sight of Golden Bow, he began to empty his revolvers into the air, and when they no longer spoke, he swung his hat, yelling himself hoarse with delirious exultation.

An answering shout came from the mining-camp, and on the instant a match was applied to a pile of materials for a bonfire, saturated with oil, over which the flames spread at a flash, sending dense clouds of black smoke high into the air.

At the *casa*—

But let us see what the merry little strategist had been up to, meanwhile.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DELICATE NEGOTIATION.

CHIQUITA was not the sort of person to spend much time at either tears or prayers. She was too much in the habit, when anything was to be done, of doing it herself.

Tom was scarcely out of sight when she left the house, and made her way to the *fonda* where Guillemma yet awaited the return of the goose that laid her golden eggs!

She found herself preceded by the weeping mother of the intractable Perside.

The two old women were in great terror and distress, their eyes fixed shudderingly on a bottle which Perside's mother had brought with her.

"Been trying to poison herself, has she?" cried Chiquita, when she had listened to the agitated story of Perside's last madness. "Well, the more fool she! To think of sacrificing no end of good times that this delightfully naughty world can give one, for a wretch of a bandit who would lodge one in a cave, like a bear! To be sure, there is some fun in playing at hide and seek with the soldiers that the *alcalde* sends out once in a while, when one has plundered somebody who is worth considering.

"But what is this I hear? Is she not content to know that this wonderful *senorita*, of whom she is so senselessly jealous, would not wipe her shoes on her bandit, but has run away with a better man by far?"

"No one has told her," sobbed the mother.

"And how is one to get the news, if one sits moping in the house, tearing one's hair and swallowing poisons by the bottle? Come, now, Guillemma! has not *Senor Templeton* been here to inquire after the lady whom he is supposed to have in charge?"

"Half an hour ago," answered Guillemma.

"And, being a man, has left her note, I'll wager, telling him of her elopement with his friend."

Chiquita immediately began to look about for the note, which she found where Tom had left it on the table.

"Well," she observed, as she unscrupulously possessed herself of the contents of the note, "that *Inez Garcia* must be getting ready for confirmation! She has told the truth for once, with only unimportant embellishments!"—this of a friend who had told her of the existence of the note.

"But let us go to this imbecile, who so longs for white robes in the place of scarlet ones. For my part, for the present, at least, my taste runs differently. But that is not a matter for quarreling. Come! let us see what can be done to reconcile her to this earth for a short time longer.

"But first, would you rather let her have this toy that she is crying for—this bandit—or a coffin? I suppose mothers have some choice in matters of this kind."

Perside's mother crossed herself vigorously at this blunt putting of the case. Without deciding the question definitely just then, she prepared to follow Chiquita, blessing her if she could in any way console her perverse child.

Accompanied by Guillemma, they found Perside looking as much more desperate as possible than she did when she first presented herself to Maude's inspection.

She had been crying steadily all night and all day, with several irruptions of violent hysterics. The utter demolition of the presents Maude had given her was the slightest of her amusements. She had torn handfuls of her really beautiful hair out by the roots. She had deliberately bumped her head on the floor, like a petulant child, till her forehead was bruised and even bloody, and her head ached to distraction. She had refused to eat, to drink, to lie down—in short, to do anything but rage at her mother for having blighted her life by thwarting her love till it was now too late, and denounce Sancho as a perjured villain who had abducted another in her place.

In vain had poor Sancho seen her earlier in the day, ready and eager to swear to anything that would pacify her. He did swear that he had at once discovered that the masquerade dress in which he had expected his sweetheart

did not contain her exquisitely graceful person; whereupon he had waited and waited, sorely puzzled, to leave disconsolate when the *fandango* broke up, with no further thought of the person who had mysteriously taken her place.

But, Miss Perside could not be taken in by any such chaff as this. Sancho had been altogether too good a lover. She knew that, in such circumstances, nothing in the world would have induced him to leave the town till he had seen her and got an explanation.

She was ready to admit that he might have captured Maude by mistake, misled by the dress—for the transfer of which by purchase might all those concerned be forever execrated. But the fact that Maude was not returned when her identity was revealed, was proof that, having her, he had been captivated by her beauty, and had resolved to keep her.

At this point Perside, as he had said, attempted his life, and then her own.

She was now about as nearly insane as it is possible for any one to be, and yet follow rational discourse when it is addressed to them.

"Well, upon my word!" cried Chiquita, coolly inspecting the wretched girl, "I would not make myself such a fright for Gomez, and he is no bandit. I would not have the combing of your hair for anything, not to mention the possession of such a head to be combed. Believe me, my dear, you will shed more tears over the straightening out of that mop than over the supposed treachery of your Sancho. And such a lovely piece of silk to be ruined, all through folly! When will you ever have anything so becoming again! It is just your color. If it had been made expressly for you, no one would have altered it a shade."

The room was littered with bits of silk, torn with hands and teeth, twisted into knots and strings, wet with angry tears, and grimy with dirt, where it had been trampled upon, and even scrubbed on the floor.

Perside had refused to let her mother clear up the wreck she had made, for the time being holding undisputed possession of the house.

"Well," pursued Chiquita, after a rueful examination of some scraps which were sufficiently free from soil to admit of an estimate of the original beauty of the fabric, "I wonder if you are so beside yourself as to have quite forgotten the little English I labored so hard to beat into your foolish head, so as to get a little sympathy in the reading of the love scenes in that beautiful romance of *Ivanhoe* and the lovely Jewess! Didn't I shed as many tears then as you are shedding now over your beggarly bandit? But what would you have thought of me, if I had bumped my head on the floor, and pulled enough hair out of my head to make a wig for Benita, and ruined the prettiest toilet that a silly fool like you ever had or ever ought to have? It was altogether too good for you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and I am glad that you will be a perfect fright for many a sorry day after you get over this.

"I have half a mind not to show you what I have here. Well, men are fools, even if they are bandits, to bother about such rubbish. I wish Sancho joy of you!"

But poor Perside was too much of a wreck for contention or curiosity. She sat in sullen despair, receiving passively the pelting hail of Chiquita's indignant reproof.

The little schemer went up to her and shook her by the shoulder.

"Will you look at this, and see what a fool you have made of yourself?" she demanded, thrusting Maude's enforced note under her nose.

"Maybe you will say that you do not know her writing, and that this may be a forgery trumped up by Sancho, or me, or your mother—we being in his interests, to be sure. Well, I have taken the liberty to fetch a diary of hers, some choice passages in which we would have had difficulty in composing. See! she has already been scribbling about this day-old lover of hers!"

Perside did not glance at the diary, but she fixed her eyes on the note with a dull glare.

Chiquita read it to her in English, and then translated it into Spanish.

For a time the girl sat unmoved, and then of a sudden uttered a piercing cry, and dropping her face in her lap, threw the skirt of her dress over her head, holding it down fast.

Then Chiquita's manner changed. Kneeling, she threw her arms about her stricken friend, and so waited, not speaking.

Presently a voice came from the folds of the dress.

"You are deceiving me! What have I done to you? I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" The wise diplomat vouchsafed no reply, but waited still.

Shortly the dress was thrown off with a whisk, and a pair of as loving arms as ever held the Arch Rogue a prisoner were thrown about Chiquita's neck, in an embrace so convulsive that she was well-nigh strangled.

"Chiquita! Chiquita! do you believe it?" came the cry of that racked heart.

"Believe it! I know that those two are as great fools over each other as heart could desire. And Sancho!—he is simply—"

Away flashed Perside, as if repelled by an electric shock.

"He has sent you to me!" came the accusation. "You are a league of liars!"

"He!" cried the maid, quite undisturbed, perhaps because she was so familiar with that impeachment. "Did you ever know a man who had the wit to do anything to which he had not served an apprenticeship? He does nothing but wander around, as helpless as a big baby! Your aunt will tell you that this note was brought to her by *Senor Templeton*, to whom it is addressed."

By this time she was being strangled again, while a flood of tears was poured over her face, blent with such kisses as even she had never before received.

The victory was won. Perside swung over to the other extreme at a sweep. Sancho, the best and truest lover that ever an ungrateful and unworthy girl was blessed with, was a martyr to her imbecile jealousy; and she was for going to him at once, to fall on her knees at his feet, and beg him to take her and forgive her.

Then the other went back to her wonted sarcasms.

"Once a fool, always a fool!" she ejaculated. "You would make an insufferable tyrant of an angel, not to say a son of Adam, and a bandit at that!"

But, Perside cared nothing for this. She longed to have the heel of outraged love set upon her neck!

"But, little idiot! do you forget that you have a mother? Will you trumpet in her ears your determination to go to this lover, whom she abhors? Wait till to-night. Never fear but he will be around. And then, if you can cool off a little meanwhile, for the sake of your future peace, you will have occasion to thank me for the suggestion. Stand on the condition that he shews you these lovers; and then consent to forgive him for causing you a miserable day."

"I who am alone to blame!" sighed Perside.

"Does that matter?" demanded Chiquita. "You want him to prize you, don't you? Then make him feel that you are mighty hard to get, and a great deal harder to keep. Make him thank God for you on any terms!"

With which sage advice she went her way, leaving behind her the happiest, though at the same time the most tortured girl in *San Hernandez*.

You may depend that she had no difficulty in finding the miserable Sancho, who had been spending all the day in cursing the cupidity that caused him to think of holding Maude for a ransom.

"Didn't I tell you that that letter was the thing?" was her triumphant demand, alluding to a meeting with him that morning, in which she had advised its procurement. "That has saved your bacon, young man! See to it that you don't get into another such scrape when I am not at hand to help you out of it."

"She believes?" cried Sancho, ready to go on his knees with gratitude to his savior.

"She will believe when you show her these two together."

"Now, by all the saints! is she lost to me unless I can produce that impossibility? Where is this devil of an *Americano*? I will scour the world for him, and drag him to the altar by the neck! He shall marry this miserable coquette who entrapped me in her execrable flirtation, whether either of them will or no!"

"Hear him!" cried the little maid, as if appealing to the spirits of the air. "It is wretches like he that always shift the burden of their own wickedness to other shoulders! It is lucky for you that I please myself in serving you, or I would leave you to your own devices."

Thereupon, having not enough time at her disposal to permit of prolonged teasing, the little maid lifted the burden from Sancho's heart by making the way plain before him.

"Ah! is there anything that you don't know, or can't do?" he cried, in ecstasy.

But she left him, to quicken his appreciation of women, as she said, by reflection on his own question.

She had intended to go directly back to the *casa*, to relieve Francisca's anxiety at her long stay; but the longing to see the duel became so strong, as she saw the last stragglers hastening through the town, that she persuaded herself she was only going to get a glimpse of the ground, and hasten right back; and so went, only to find the fascination of the place irresistible, and to excuse her remaining, on the plea that as Francisca knew nothing of what was going on, she would not be worried. And then, above all things, would not she long to be told of her lover's gallant exploit as only Chiquita could tell her!

So it happened that some time after the excitement of the duel had reached the *casa* she sunk into her mistress's arms, almost fainting with delight.

Such a story as she told! The exploit of no Greek hero or demigod was ever so sung! Francisca was intoxicated with delight. And when she learned that he had spared the adversary who had so ruthlessly sought his life, both because of his aversion to bloodshed and because he was of her kin, she could not stay the grateful tears that rained down her cheeks, yet pale with the thought of his peril.

"And now," said the little *intriguante* to herself, "it remains to get rid of this bothersome grenadier!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

NOBODY THE WISER.

WHAT were Charley Osborne's astonishment and Benita's chagrin, at being required by the imperious Chiquita to stand back to back, to see how nearly their heads came in a line, the duenna's stature being eked out by a pair of wooden clogs which she was in the habit of wearing in wet weather, while Charley lost the advantage of his boot heels being reduced to his stocking feet.

The duenna was of large frame for a woman, yet even this double arrangement left a discrepancy at which the little maid could but gaze in dismay, as she stood on a chair to make her inspection.

"What can I do with you, my grenadier?" she begged, plaintively. "What a pity that you have not wooden legs, which we could saw off at the proper length! Can you not crouch a little? Bend your knees. Look at me! So. Now see if you can walk in that position. Ah! what grace!"

And the little maid held her sides with laughter.

However it was decided that the darkness would cover what a dress of Benita's failed to hide, and rigged out as a counterfeit of the enraged duenna, Charley was put through his paces by the tricky sprite who had him in charge.

From that moment she teased him mercilessly, by calling him her Knight of the Petticoat!

It may be believed that Charley did not take to this phase of his adventure very kindly. But Chiquita had a thousand reasons to show that it was best he should make his escape thus disguised in the early evening, while most of the people about the *casa* were engaged at supper; and as she had managed so cleverly thus far, she carried her point in this.

Of course Charley was bound to make any sacrifice of his feelings demanded by the exigency of the lady so painfully embarrassed by his presence.

As the night fell, the first step was for Francisca to seek her father in his study, where he sat in gloomy reflection on Alverado's defeat, pretending to read, yet seeing nothing on the page.

The girl crept into his presence with fear and trembling, dreading to draw attention upon herself by making so much as a sound, yet longing to cast herself into his arms, and seek reconciliation.

Meanwhile Chiquita went out in company with Benita, apparently to carry some little necessities and delicacies to a bedridden old crony of the duenna's, who lived not far from the *casa*, the way to her house being through the chaparral where Charley had been captured.

Returning some time after, they set out again, as if some whim of the exacting old invalid had necessitated a second trip.

As such comings and goings were not unusual, they excited no remark.

But what was the duenna's astonishment during this second excursion, to find herself suddenly made a prisoner by a party of men evidently in collusion with the audacious little maid?

For Chiquita now for the first time coolly revealed to her that this was a part of her scheme, and if she behaved herself, no harm would come to her; but that the situation was desperate, and neither age nor sex would be considered if she made any effort to disconcert her plans.

Then the artful maneuverer stole back to the *casa* alone, and presently reappeared with her Knight of the Petticoat.

Charley acquitted himself so as to win laughing plaudits from her as soon as they were at a safe distance.

"And here, my knight, I must beg you to divest yourself of your armor, so that I can take it back. But first I must have a new pledge from you. Put your hands palm to palm, and hold them between mine. So!"

"Aren't you done yet, you little tease?" asked Charley, yielding a ready compliance.

For reply, he heard a sharp *click! click!* and realized that a pair of handcuffs had been sprung upon his wrists.

"In the name of all that is good, what is the meaning of this?" he ejaculated.

"See for yourself, senor; and henceforth do justice to a woman's wits!" answered the minx, scratching a friction match.

By its illumination, Charley saw that he was surrounded by a band of strange men, and at the same instant the light of a lasso dropped over him, closing about his legs, and making him as secure a prisoner as could be desired.

One of their number stooped and fastened upon his ankles a pair of irons linked together by a short chain, whereupon the lasso was cast off.

The match went out before Charley had recovered from his amazement, and to his subsequent appeal no reply came from his clever betrayer.

Instead, a brawny captor thrust an arm

through his on either side, and a gruff voice said:

"Come, senor, march!"

"And she could smile and smile, and be a villain still!" quoted Charley to himself, as he moved off, whither he could not guess, between his guards.

After a walk which seemed to skirt the town about half its circumference, he was taken into a house, and there in a darkened room seated.

To his surprise, his irons were now removed; a voice said:

"Wait!" and he was left alone.

"Well, this is getting interesting!" he said.

"What next, I wonder?"

He was not long in suspense. A door opened, and some one entered, seemingly to find a seat directly across the room from him.

His strained ears seemed to catch the rustle of a woman's garments; and he distinguished the retreating steps of the person who had accompanied her as those of a man walking on tiptoe.

The door closed again after him, whoever he was, to be opened a moment later, when a lighted candle was thrust in and set on the table near by, and the door was instantly shut again.

Charley fairly jumped out of his chair! There, sitting in silence directly opposite him, was the *danseuse* of the fandango, still in her fancy dress, and masked!

"You little vixen!" he cried, making for her without a moment's hesitation, in the full conviction that she was Chiquita, playing some sort of prank upon him. "You shall pay for this, or I'm a Turk!"

The lady arose hastily from her chair, with a cry of astonishment, and perhaps some alarm.

Risen to his full height, so that Benita's petticoats came about half way below his knees, Chiquita's grenadier was a spectacle to excite some surprise, if not dismay.

But there was no chance for escape. He seized his victim, and had her mask off and herself well-kissed before she could say "Jack Robinson!"

Then he started back with a gasping ejaculation. He had saluted the right lady, but under the wrong circumstances! He stood speechless, staring into the crimson face of Maude Granville!

She was the first to recover herself, and while she struggled with a hysterical laugh in competition with an almost overmastering impulse to fly into a towering rage and blow her unlucky lover sky-high, said:

"Don't apologize! I see that you are quite unaccountable for anything you may do!"

And a glance at his ridiculous outfit gave point to her sarcasm.

Then Charley Osborne's good genius took possession of him, and carried him through this critical period of his eventful career with a rush.

Casting himself on his knees at her feet, he flung his arms about her waist and held her prisoner, while he pleaded, as if for more than life:

"Of course that little witch must have told you everything, or she would not have lent you her dress to play this trick on me; and equally of course you must have forgiven me, and must be mine in your secret heart, or you would as soon have wrapped yourself in a sheet of flame as have come here in it to meet me! But, my darling, if she has told you all of the nonsense of that miserable night, you must know that never for a moment have I been really disloyal to you, even when—when—when—appearances were most against me!"

This impassioned outburst told Maude that, by some strange misapprehension, the man at her feet did not know that she was the *danseuse* with whom he had so outrageously flirted, but believed that she had borrowed that arch coquette's dress for this occasion. Was it possible to keep him still in the dark?

"Charley!" she whispered, resting her hands on his shoulders, and bending over him to transfix him with her starry eyes, "do you really love me?"

"From the bottom of my soul!" he declared. "And I shall never know a minute's peace till you are my wife, bound fast and hard! Let me have you now, this very night."

"Will you take me away from this horrid place? I hate the very sight and name of it, and everybody in it!"

"You shall go to the ends of the earth, if you like, and immediately."

"And, Charley, we will begin our lives all over again from the moment we quit this house, and never exchange a word about anything that lies back of it?"

It would be the tormenting mystery of her life, how he had come to appear there in that strange guise; but she was willing to sacrifice her curiosity, to gain for herself the security of absolute silence.

"Never!" he agreed, only too gladly.

Then she tore Benita's *robosa* from his shoulders, and threw it spitefully across the room.

"Take those hateful things off of you! I can't bear to see them!"

He complied, and then caught her in his arms in an ecstasy of exultation.

At that moment the shutter which closed the unglazed window was thrown open, and they caught a fleeting glimpse of a wildly beautiful face gazing in upon them with devouring intensity.

There was a sob; the face disappeared; the shutter was slammed to. Charley sprang to the window. He was only in time to bear a horse galloping away in the darkness. He could not guess that on its back it carried the happiest bandit on the Pacific Slope, and a girl who clung about his neck, sobbing wildly on his breast.

When Charley pulled his head in again, Maude had disappeared; but in her place Sancho's lieutenant accosted him politely.

"Senor, the lady will be ready in a moment, and horses are at your disposal without."

Maude soon presented herself arrayed in one of her own bewitching toilets.

While he was helping her into the saddle, she whispered:

"Charley, can you reach a minister so that we can be married before midnight, and have the certificate dated to-day?"

"If there's virtue in horseflesh, we will!" declared the happy lover.

And he made good his promise, the chime of midnight not sounding in the neighboring town till they had been pronounced man and wife!

Meanwhile Chiquita returned to the *casa*, to find her mistress lying like one longing for the boon of death! She had had a terrible interview with her father, in which he had left her the alternative of marriage with Alverado, or a nunnery, her fate to be irrevocably decided on the morrow.

Then the faithful little maneuverer and generalissimo of intrigue took her despairing mistress in her arms, and told her of the happiness that wooed her acceptance. Everything was arranged. She had but to remain passive.

Was it wonderful that, when at midnight, Tom appeared at her window at the top of a ladder, she sunk upon his breast, to be lifted out, and borne down and away into the darkness?

The little maid followed, of course; and the morning sun was just beginning to touch the eastern sky with gray when they rode up to a mission-house many miles distant from San Hernandez.

They found another party arrived before them; and upon discovering, with seeming unexpectedness, the pretty Perside and her bandit, Chiquita exclaimed:

"Well! well! well! is it possible that we are to have the good fortune of a double wedding?"

"There's luck in odd numbers; and three is the only perfect one—with beginning, middle, and end!" said a voice at her elbow.

Turning with a start of real surprise this time, Chiquita stood face to face with Gomez!

"What! what! you? How came you here?"

"By following you, Chiquita. Did you not say—Take me now?"

Gomez answered quietly and with perfect simplicity.

With a sudden ebullition of feeling Chiquita threw her arms about his neck.

So the fateful words were spoken that fixed the fate of all, for good or ill.

On their way back they came unexpectedly upon Charley and Maude; and as every one seemed to take it for granted that she had been with Charley from the first, Maude was soon talked out of her aversion to San Hernandez, and the whole party returned to Golden Bow, where a little army of enthusiasts, with Cap Frobisher at their head, engaged to guard them against all comers.

Fate having taken the matter out of her hands, Perside's mother developed a great pride in her bandit son-in-law; and well might she believe that he cared handsomely for his impetuous little bride, judging from the bright face that from time to time came down from the mountains.

Perside had but one bout with Mother Maldito, which resulted in the utter rout of the old witch, who therefore was as harmless, though often as grumbling, as a toothless old dog.

Alverado Saumarez being in hopeless disgrace, Tom Templeton and old Don Monteiro da Rocha were eventually brought together, the gallantry of the latter winning upon the truly magnanimous old courtier, who was perhaps the more placable because of a sore spot in his heart till his daughter once more lay upon it.

Then Francisca's cup of happiness was full.

Chiquita had so bound everybody's tongue by one device or another, that no one ever made any disagreeable discoveries about that eventful night, though the friendship between Francisca and Maude was never quite so confidential as that between their husbands.

"And to think!" cried the little maid, exultantly hugging her grave Gomez, who was the only one in her confidence, "that it was all brought about with never a word of truth to anybody! Oh, isn't it delicious to be so naughty—and not get caught!"

THE END.

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